

Foul Play by XFiles93Aficionado

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Summary:

Hopper is wanted for murder and kidnapping. Joyce and the party come to the rescue. Set in March 1985, months after Season 2 ended.

1. The Framing of Jim Hopper

Author's Note:

ChaneenW, as always, you're my rock!

After an exceptionally cold winter, touches of green on trees announcing the returning spring was a blessing. According to meteorologists, this winter had been one of the worst in recorded history. Spring had officially arrived yesterday, and Joyce even rolled down her windows wherever she drove; these mild temperatures felt as good as summer days.

"With the rapid-fire deaths of Andropov and Chernenko, Gorbachev had outlived his only serious competition, and he was selected to become the new leader of the Soviet Union on March 11, 1985," the newscaster announced on the radio. "Principal Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes commented earlier last week that President Reagan believes this is a very special moment in the history of mankind. 'We win; they lose,' Mr. Reagan joked when he was asked to define his plan to end the Cold W—."

As she drove along the freeway, Joyce switched the radio station. Whether Reagan was right or not that this was a special moment, everyone had already heard the news at least once a day within the last two weeks. And in Hawkins, Indiana, the historical event wouldn't change their everyday lives. The new station played music. *That* song again. "Can't Fight This Feeling". That and Gorbachev: that's all that was on the radio anymore. As the song unfolded, she let Kevin Cronin voice an irresistible longing for connection, the long haul to get there, and her thoughts wandered to Hopper. Once again.

"Oh, I can't fight this feeling any longer. And yet I'm still afraid to let it flow. What started out this friendship has grown stronger. I only wish I had the strength to let it show ..."

It was as if the song had been written for her. Or him. For them, most likely. For more than six months they had seen each other on a regular basis because of their kids, not as often as she'd come to wish in the recent weeks, but Hopper had taken his job as father very seriously and since he still had to hide Eleven, he home-schooled her

and didn't go out much. She admired him for that, she admired him for a lot of things actually, and the more she became aware of it, the more she realized she was starting to feel things that she didn't know what to do with. All of a sudden she was fantasizing about living with this nicotine addict in his tiny murder shack hidden deep within the woods, eating Eggos for each and every meal, and making tripwires taut with bullet-loaded mousetraps all around the house so they could do the dirty deed in peace for days.

"I can't fight this feeling anymore. I've forgotten what I started fighting for. It's time to bring this ship into the shore and throw away the oars, forever."

She switched the radio dial again; this time to quiet it. She was pleased, however, that she'd get to see him tomorrow, because of course El wouldn't miss Will's fourteenth birthday party, and if Hopper wasn't on duty, he'd probably tag along while the kids played. In fact, she was just heading back from Indianapolis where she had finally gotten her hands on the Holy Grail: a Commodore 64 with the Ghostbusters game.

When she had called Hopper at the station to invite them, she had mentioned that Will wanted to go to the movies to watch *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning* and that they would have a late dinner afterward. Horror wasn't really her favorite kind of film, considering. But Steve Harrington had said he would go with the kids, and she could wait across the street with a beer or whatever. She wouldn't have minded Hopper's company, but he hadn't seemed to have taken the hint. She knew that Will wouldn't expect the Commodore, she'd put every last penny in this present, and he would probably want to spend a good amount of hours on it with his friends during the weekend. Joyce had suggested the idea that in all likelihood the kids would sleep over at least on Friday night, to which Hopper had replied that with the Wheeler kid around, he'd had to think about it. She couldn't blame him for being the worried and protective father of a thirteen-year-old girl. More than once, she'd felt that this was something Hopper wanted too; her heart wanted to believe there was something reciprocal, that he found just enough willpower to hold back each time out of respect for her or because of Bob — she didn't know.

As she passed the “Welcome to Hawkins” sign, the flashing red and blue lights of the Hawkins Police Department cars blurred her vision and an unfathomable, irrational fear instantly clutched the pit of her stomach— but then again, what was rational, really, in the last eighteen months they’d had? A roadblock. What now? They were stopping every car that was going out of town. She slowed down, wanting to know what was going on, but didn’t recognize any of the officers. The lights flared in her eyes as she passed the officers’ cars and an officer nodded and signaled her to go ahead. They were not Hawkins Police as she’d first assumed; they were Indiana State Police vehicles. Ahead of her, a long string of red taillights lined the road. A noise came overhead, a noise strange to Hawkins, save for two years prior, and she raised her face below the windshield: the sky was blue with spattered white puffs, and the helicopters were impossible to miss.

She gently moved her foot down on the gas pedal again, looking at the line of cars waiting to be pulled over. There was Scott Clarke’s.

She stopped next to him and he rolled down his window when he recognized her.

“Hello, Scott, what’s going on?”

“Hello, Joyce. They’re looking for Chief Hopper.”

“What? Hopper? Why?”

“Not sure exactly. A warrant, I think. Murder and kidnapping is what I heard.”

“Murder and kidnapping? Hopper? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” he said, smiling.

“I know, I’m sorry,” she replied, putting her hand on his arm that hung from his window. “Well, thanks anyway. Say hi to Jen for me, will you?”

“Sure thing.”

As Clarke rolled up his window, Joyce looked in the rear-view

mirror. Staring at her as she slowly drove away, a tall man stepped in front of the flashing lights; he must have seen her talk to the science teacher, but he came to a halt when Joyce drove further away. All things considered, it wasn't a good idea to pay Hopper a visit at his cabin and ask him what was going on right now. If they really were after him, they most likely were unaware not only of the location of his grandfather's shack but of its existence, too. She nervously stroked her palms on the wheel, gripped it tighter and moved along a little faster, careful not to slam the gas pedal as her instincts told her to do.

A helicopter flew above the road again, very low in the sky. Whoever these guys were, they were not locals. But worst of all, at one point or another, Hopper's cabin wouldn't be a secret anymore. These green leaves she'd been admiring just minutes before weren't thick enough yet to hide anything or anyone.

She considered driving to the station to talk to Powell, Callahan, Florence, or anyone whose face was familiar, but she decided against it and went straight home. If Hopper were over at the station, or if his colleagues knew anything about his whereabouts, they wouldn't be looking all over for him or setting up roadblocks.

It was five o'clock, and her kids must be home, at least they would be there shortly, and there was a better way to know what was going on than going to the Hawkins Police Station, a more secure way to get in touch with him, whether he was home or in his car.

In Will's room, Joyce sat down in front of the Heathkit DX-60 — Bob Newby's postmortem present; his parents had found it in his old room, it had been Bob's most precious thing when he was about Will's age and they had thought Will might have liked to have it, they had commented with reddened eyes. She switched the station to 11 and trailed her fingers along the alphabet pinned to the wall in front of his desk while her left, slightly shaky thumb meticulously pushed the talk bar of the handset.

"Dot dot dash, dot dash dot, dash dash dot, dot, dash dot, dash," she clicked. "Urgent," she whispered. "Come on, Hop, pick up."

Will used the AM transmitter to talk to the boys, and Joyce had

watched him use it many times to contact Eleven.

Letter by letter, she followed the small sheet and kept going, stiff with tension.

“YOU THERE? IT’S J.”

“HI. 11 HERE.”

“HI. IS HE THERE?”

“SICK IN BED. FEVER. MESSAGE FOR HIM?”

She leaned back against the chair, her shoulders sagging, unknotting the tension that had been building ever since the roadblock, and sighed with relief. As least he was home safe, for as long as the helicopters stayed out of the way. She bent forward and clicked again.

“TELL HIM NOT TO MOVE. I’M COMING OVER AS SOON AS I CAN. OVER.”

“Mom?” She heard Will’s voice at her back. “What’s going on?”

“Honey,” she said, startled. She put the handset down and crossed to him. Hugging him, she exhaled and said, “I don’t know what’s going on. Hopper might be in trouble.”

“Hopper?” Jonathan appeared in the hallway. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said, pulling back from Will and hastening to the kitchen, restless. “But I have to find a way to get to him without anyone else knowing it.”

They sat at the kitchen table and Joyce told her sons about the roadblocks and the little she had learnt from Mr. Clarke, and she stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

“Bikes? I could ride my bike through the woods and —” Will offered.

“No.”

“We can make a distraction; a diversion,” Jonathan said.

“What kind of diversion?” she asked, interested.

“I don’t know.” Jonathan replied. They all thought for an instant, and Jonathan said, “I can drive over to Steve’s and he and I could maybe race through town, get pursued or something.”

She considered it. “You may be onto something with the diversion idea, but I don’t want you endangering your lives or others’.”

She pulled out another cigarette and lit it, getting up. She needed to get to him; this inaction was starting to drive her nuts. She needed to make sure he was okay. Hopper had had his errant moments where he was quick to take a swing at people’s faces, but that time was behind him now, and even then it was more bar fights than anything serious. Whoever had been murdered, this whole thing was a setup, there simply was no other explanation. She thought of her youngest and realized that for all she knew, maybe there even wasn’t a body, not one of flesh and blood anyway.

On edge, she jumped and turned toward the window at the wailing sound of police sirens in the distance.

“Oh god,” Joyce breathed as her boys stood to watch by her side.

“Think they found him?” Will asked quietly.

She stubbed her cigarette in the sink, whirled around, and started looking for her car keys. “I don’t know but I can’t —”

“Mom,” Jonathan called calmly. “Mom!” he shouted again when she didn’t register the first time.

She dashed to the window again, following her sons’ gazes. Two police cars had turned left and were rushing up their driveway. Slamming the brakes, the cars pulled to an abrupt stop in a dusty cloud.

“What the hell?” Jonathan said.

Powell and Callahan got out of their cars and dashed to the front door, and Joyce hurried to them.

“Did you find him?” She asked, anxious.

“Hi, Joyce,” Powell said calmly, one hand on his gun holster, the other holding a sheet of paper. “I’m sorry but we have a warrant to search your place.”

“You what? You think I’m hiding him?”

“We’re just following orders, Joyce.”

“Whose?” she shouted, impatience and annoyance growing inside her. “Whose orders are you following? Cause it sure as hell isn’t Hopper’s.”

They remained silent and she moved aside as they made their way through the doorway, handing her the issued warrant. A few minutes later, they came back empty handed.

“So? Did you find him?” she asked bitterly, and then she softened her voice, “What’s going on?”

“We’re gonna have to ask you to come with us.”

“What?” She exclaimed.

“Why?” The boys asked in one voice.

“Please, Joyce, don’t make it any more complicated than it already is.”

“Like hell. You found nothing in here. Why do I have to go with you?”

“Questioning,” Callahan replied as if it explained anything.

“About what?” she wondered out loud. “I don’t know where Hop is any more than you do.”

“But you’ve been in contact with him, haven’t you?”

Her mouth dropped agape and she turned her face to Powell. "Now, how do you know that?"

"Mrs. Byers, come with us or we might have to arrest you."

"This is bullshit!" Jonathan protested.

"Joyce," Powell started, almost pleading.

A helicopter flew overhead and they all looked up, then she returned her attention to her kids. "I'll go," she said quietly. She bent down to Will and lowered her voice. "You two stay here until I come back." She looked up to Jonathan, making sure he understood, and looked back at Will again. "No biking," she warned, "no rescue missions with the party, no diversion of any kind or any other stupid prank. I'm serious. You wait *here*." They both nodded, and she turned again to Powell. "Let's get this over with."

2. Divide and Rule

Once they were at the police station, Powell led Joyce to Hopper's office. "For privacy," he commented. He sat behind Hopper's desk while Callahan remained with his arms crossed over his chest next to the closed door. Powell folded his hands over paperwork, and his big brown eyes met to hers. His were empty, out of focus as if sightless, as if a part of himself had been switched off and the one that was still on didn't know why or how to operate. And, well, maybe that was the case; maybe these two nice officers relied on Hopper so much that with him out of the picture, it simply was impossible for them to bring something out of nothing. Or out of something too big for them.

"Sit," he said.

Joyce looked over her shoulder at Callahan and took her seat opposite Powell. There was a silence, but even though she was anxious to get home, anxious to find Hopper and Eleven, she was not ready to make their task any easier than was necessary.

"So?" she eventually pressed, her brows raised, opening her palms in reckoning.

"He didn't show up."

"And?"

"We haven't seen him since Monday," Powell said again, his voice devoid of emotion.

"And that makes him a criminal on the run?" Joyce asked in disbelief.

"Sure doesn't help his case," Callahan said.

She twisted to Callahan, her elbow on the back of her chair. "What is the case exactly?"

"Where is he? We know you've been in contact with him," Powell said.

“So you said.”

“We heard bits of your coded messages.”

“You can do that? *Hawkins Police* can do that? Why am I being watched?”

“It isn’t us.”

“Then who is it?”

“We can’t say.”

“Why are you looking for him?”

There was a pause. “He’s killed a man and kidnapped a little girl.”

She scoffed and chuckled. “That’s ridiculous, Calvin. You know Hopper as much as anyone else. He wouldn’t ...” — she frowned — “*murder* anyone.” The word “murder” sounded absolutely out of character.

“It’s out of our hands.”

Joyce looked at them both, trying to make some sense of all this, but they were expressionless. She sighed. “And who might he have killed?”

“A doctor,” Powell said.

“A doctor?”

“Doctor Sam Owens.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Oh no ...”

“Did you know him?”

“You know I do. He treated my son last year.”

“Then you know he and Hopper knew each other too, and they forged a birth certificate together.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she whispered as she reached for a cigarette, stuck it in her mouth and lit it.

“Why don’t you explain it to us, then? What can you tell us about Dr. Owens?”

“Nothing that you’d understand,” she retorted as she exhaled the smoke. “Owens is a good man, I can tell you that much, and Hopper trusts him. He would never have ...” She couldn’t even say the word.

Powell sighted and scratched his forehead in painful irresolution. “Where’s the Chief, Joyce?”

“I told you I don’t know,” she replied for what seemed to be the hundredth time.

“Joyce, if you lie to us we’ll have to put you under arrest.”

“You know as well as I do that Hopper has nothing to do with it.”

“Let us be the judge of that. Where is he?”

“Oh, for crying out loud ...” Again, seriously? “Who are those guys at the roadblocks?” she fought back.

“We ask the questions, you answer. That’s the way it works, not the other way around.”

She wanted to tell them that they were doing a pretty lame job out of it, but she bit her lip and kept it to herself. “You know what I think?” Joyce said instead.

“Tell us. What do you think?”

She killed her cigarette in Hopper’s astray, and then she said, very calmly: “I think if you really wanted to arrest Hop, you would have done *nothing*. You would have just been very, very quiet about it, do everything as usual, and he would have shown up by himself because you *know* his conscience is clear.” She scrutinized Powell’s reaction. He hadn’t expected her to say that. She was right. She knew she was. Something was terribly off here. She resumed softly: “All you had to do was simply wait for him.” His face trained on her,

Powell looked sideways from the corner of his eyes, glancing at something over his shoulder but she didn't pay attention to it, eager to finish speaking her truth: "If I didn't know any better I'd say *you* didn't want him found."

Powell startled her by standing up hastily and slamming his hand on the table, shouting "WHERE IS HE?" He glanced over his shoulder again, but this time Joyce understood: his hands were also tied, they were being watched. Either the roadblocks were his idea to warn Hopper or he had willingly done nothing to stop them.

Joyce slowly leaned back against her chair. "I have nothing to say," she said calmly. "I don't know where he is."

"Then I'm sorry, you're forcing our hands. Get up. Joyce Byers, you're under arrest for accessory to murder and kidnapping."

"You don't want to do that; you and I both know that your best shot at getting him is to let me loose." Powell looked unsure. "Call Jonathan and have him pick me up."

There was a knock on the glass and Powell exchanged glances with Callahan and went out. The venetian blinds he had indicated to her twice were pulled down so she couldn't see who was behind them, but he came back a few seconds later and said, "Okay, Joyce, you're free to go. See Flo and she'll call your son."

Joyce stood and turned to leave. At the last second, she spun around and pointed a finger at Powell. "By the way, when he learns you've been using his office, he's gonna be pretty pissed off."

Joyce put the little brown bag with the painkillers and fever-reducing medication she and Jonathan had bought on the kitchen table. Shrugging her coat off of her shoulders, she walked over to Will who was sitting on the couch, and her eyes strayed to the pile of drawings that once consisted a map of Hawkins' undergrounds and that now rested in front of Will on the coffee table.

"What are you doing?" She asked a bit alarmed, throwing her

coat carelessly onto an armchair, but the question was unsubstantial because she knew full well what they'd been up to while she was gone. "No, no, no, this is out of the question."

Jonathan trotted over to sit next to his brother. "Mom, bear with us for just a minute," he pleaded. "What better choice do we have?"

She sat down next to them, gathering the papers on her lap, and then she sighed and stared at her boys, thinking about it. This was a stupid, dangerous idea. Yet the question wasn't really "what better choice" but rather "what other choice" did they have. The map was not only their first idea but the only one they had. And she had no clue how else to get to Hopper unnoticed.

"All right, but you're not going," she stated.

"What? Mom, come on!" they whined. Johnathan almost jumped from his seat.

"No!" she reaffirmed as she put the papers back on the table and stood to get a cigarette in her coat.

"But I want to help them, Mom," Will implored.

"And I don't want you in any more perilous situations than you've already been."

"Eleven helped me before, and if she's in trouble, you can't leave me out of this. Please," Will said, and even though she understood what he was saying, she wasn't ready to take the risk.

"I don't want to let you go down those tunnels on your own," Jonathan added.

"Jonathan," Joyce started.

"We can all go: the atmosphere is only damaging after prolonged exposure," Will argued.

"It's not just the atmosphere, honey. We can't know for sure that there's nothing down there anymore."

“No, but here’s the thing, these tunnels, they weren’t really the Upside Down as we know it. They were *our* world, not a replica of Hawkins: the galleries spread *beneath* Hawkins.”

“Maybe you’re right, but that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want you down there.”

“Mom, everything died; it’s just a foxhole now.”

Well, she surely hoped so. She held their begging stares and sighed. “How about ... you guide me with your walkie from up here?”

“You know you can’t communicate between the two worlds,” Jonathan said.

“I think we just agreed that it’s not a different world.” Will opened his mouth to talk again, but she gave in: “Okay, okay, okay. Then you stay just at the entrance of the tunnels, and in case something happens, you get out as fast as you can. How does that sound?”

“No, I won’t let you go alone, Mom,” Jonathan said. “We stay together.”

“I would rather have you looking over your brother than me. I’ll be *fine*.”

“Divide and rule,” Will breathed quietly, his eyes searching around him as if he were trying to grab an idea, and then he stared at his mother and repeated: “Divide and rule!”

“What?”

“That’s our diversion! We divide and rule. *Impera*. We’ve used the tactics before in a game.”

“How do we do that?” Jonathan asked.

“We get everyone we know — Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Nancy, and Steve — and we ride anywhere. If anyone is under surveillance, it’s us. So whoever’s after Hopper, they’ll follow us anywhere we lead

them.”

“I don’t know,” Joyce said. On paper, it looked like an excellent plan. But she wanted to keep her sons out of all this. One struggle at a time.

“No, he’s right, this is perfect,” Jonathan commented. “Hopper has no social life, it’s only you and the kids. Compared to him, you’re Iggy Pop —”

“Hey now!” she protested with a smile.

“— We’re probably all being watched already.”

“That’s right. Mom, think about it. We control the battlefield; we divide and conquer foes. It can work.”

“We’ll need Billy Hargrove, too, though,” Jonathan said.

“No way,” Will replied as Joyce asked “Why?”

“The gossip goes he has an inflatable sex doll.”

“Gross,” Will said. “Yikes.”

“Well, I agree with you, Will, but that’s our best shot to get Mom out of the house while the cops or the Feds follow her inflatable self far away. We just want the doll, not Billy.”

3. The Doll in the Party

Will rode his bike as fast as he could straight to Mike's. It was after seven now, the sun had just set, and he didn't like to be out on his own at night anymore.

He passed Mirkwood, and the first houses of Hawkins finally came into sight. A few more blocks and he was at the Wheelers'.

"Ted, will you get that?" Will heard Mrs. Wheeler call from behind the door.

When the door opened, Mr. Wheeler promptly gestured for him to step inside before Will had the chance to say hi. "Well, come on, boy, get in, they're rerunning the pilot of *Mr. Belvedere* and I already missed the beginning last week. Don't make me miss it again."

The boy entered and closed the door behind him. Mrs. Wheeler was busy in the kitchen when he walked past. "Oh, hey, Will, Mike didn't tell me you were coming over for dinner."

"Because I'm not, Mrs. Wheeler," Will replied politely as he met Mike's gaze on the stairs. "But he's eating at my place, didn't he tell you?"

Mike stayed on the staircase and mouthed, "What's going on?"

"Actually," Will continued as the idea suddenly popped into his head, "he was supposed to sleep over at my place, too. And he's late," he concluded, dropping his shoulders dramatically, "so here I am ... to pick him up."

"Sleepover? He sure didn't mention a sleepover. I thought your birthday was tomorrow. And you have school tomorrow."

Mike rushed down the stairs. "We won't stay up late, Mom, promise. I totally forgot to tell you about it. But it's important. Don't move, Will, I'll just grab my bag and be right back."

"Besides, Jonathan told me he was picking up Nancy in a bit," Will shrugged, "they can watch us."

A few moments later, they were both pedaling and panting as Will explained the events of the night. Now and then, they looked over their shoulders, and sure enough, they were being followed.

They rode on to get Lucas, Dustin and then Steve.

“No!” Steve said when he opened the door to the boys with Dustin first in line to explain what they were up to.

“Come on, man!” Dustin exclaimed. “We *need* you here.” He put one knee to the ground and intertwined his hands in prayer.

“Look, kid, I like you, I really do. But I’ve moved on now —”

Dustin stood up abruptly and teased: “Nancy will be there.”

“We might get in big, deep trouble and we could sure use your help and ... you know, protection,” Lucas said.

“And we need Hargrove’s sex doll,” Mike added.

Steve threw his head back and his eyes popped wide open. “His *what?*” He stared at each one of them and they each turned their puppy-dog eyes on him. “Oh shit. I’ll get my car keys. Go on ahead to the Hargroves, I’ll meet you there.”

They all looked at each other when they were in front of the Hargroves’ residence. They had come up with a plan on their way, but no one volunteered to do it.

Dustin shined his flashlight in Lucas’s face. “You do it,” he decided.

“Oh, come on, he *hates* me,” Lucas protested.

“Well, duh! that’s the whole point, man!” Dustin said.

“Come on, guys, we don’t have all night,” Will pressed him.

“All right, all right, all right,” Lucas waved them off. He took a step forward, and then asked, “How do I look?”

“You look —” Dustin hesitated.

“You look great,” Mike cut him off promptly, and pushed Lucas’s back toward the entrance. “Now, go.”

Lucas rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck, his arms dangling by his sides as he shook his hands like a boxer about to enter the ring for the greatest fight of his life. He took a deep breath and pushed the doorbell while his three friends remained a few feet back. Lucas glanced back at them, nervous, and they all encouraged him and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Well, well, well,” Billy said as he opened the door, “look what we’ve got here. Lucas Sinclair.” Wearing his ever workout clothes and a towel over his shoulder, he braced his shoulder against the doorframe.

Even from behind, Lucas looked nervous; he didn’t know what to do with his hands, whether he should keep them in his pockets or wipe his sweaty palms onto his jeans. Stupid bully, Will thought.

“This isn’t what you think,” Lucas said.

“Yeah? You’re not here for Maxine?”

“No. No, actually, I’m not,” he said as he at last seemed to gain assurance. “I’m here ... for you. You’ve been working out. Awesome.” He batted his lashes.

“Is this a prank?”

“No, I —“

“You fag,” Billy cut him off, disgusted, and he moved from the door and pulled back to close it

Lucas slammed his palms onto it so that it stayed open. “See, my friends over there,” he glanced rapidly at them and turned again to Billy, “they said I had to come out of the closet.”

“Oh, he’s good,” Dustin whispered from the corner of his twisted mouth.

“Yeah,” they whispered back, mesmerized.

“Come out of the closet? What closet? What you talking about?” Billy frowned.

“Yeah, you know,” he said as he cocked his head to the side, “to stop hiding from my feelings, be true to myself, tell you how I really feel about you.”

“You, psycho!” he groaned, and attempted to close the door again.

“No, wait! How do I, um, how do I know ... you know, that I’m not into you.”

“You’re not *into me*, Midnight, lemme tell you. That’s final,” he menaced, and then he turned around and called, “Max! Hey, Maxine! Your freakin’ queer friend’s here!”

Steve arrived and parked his car in front of the house just as Max appeared at the front door.

“What’s he doing here now?” Billy asked.

“Oh, him, I don’t know,” Lucas answered. “Hey, Max.”

Billy opened the door wider and stepped out toward Steve. Meanwhile, the boys pushed Lucas inside and Lucas pushed Max backward as they explained everything briefly in a brouhaha of overexcited voices, begging her to help them find the doll.

“Gross!” Max jerked.

“Agreed,” Will replied, “but drastic times call for drastic measures.”

“Okay,” Max breathed, resolute, “there’s really only one place he could keep it.”

“His room,” the boys said, and she nodded her head as she led the way.

It didn't take long for them to find in the back of his closet what they had come for.

"Ugh, that really is disgusting," Max said as the boys pulled with the tips of their fingers the totally inflated doll out of the closet.

"I didn't know I'd be so literal about it," Lucas realized, amused.

"Shut up and help," Max said.

"Do you think it's, um, clean?" Dustin asked, a mask of disgust over his face.

"We're gonna simply assume that it is," Mike said as he tossed it repulsively down to the floor, kneeling before it in search of the air valve and popping it open to deflate the doll. The others looked down at him with both veneration and fear. Will even thought that Dustin has stopped breathing. "Well?" Mike looked up at them, "Come on and help me out here. Think about Eleven and Hopper; they need us."

They reluctantly obliged and, as they all pressed their weight onto the object of repugnance, Dustin said, "What happens in this room stays in this room, understood?"

"Yeah," they all agreed, nodding their heads fiercely, happy for the comment which allowed them to avert their eyes from that *thing* beneath them.

Suddenly, the door opened; Billy and Steve were there, and the party lay frozen for a second.

"They can't have gone far—" Billy said as he pushed the door open, and then he saw the group of friends on his floor. "What the fuck?"

"Hey," the kids remembered to breathe and spontaneously waved awkwardly, disguising their horrible discomfort behind fake-smile masks that swiftly melted into nauseated grimaces as they pushed the doll further beneath them.

"What are you doing in my room?" Billy demanded. He sounded

extremely angry. “Max, you know you are *not* to come into my room.”

“Yeah, I know, we were just ...”

Dustin quickly looked around and discreetly grabbed a tee that rested under the bedside table. He raised it over everyone’s heads. “Lucas wanted to, um ...” He stood up, wiped his hooded sweater as if it were covered with dust, and stepped in front of Billy, blocking everyone else from Billy’s view. “He wanted to smell you, you know, and we were trying to explain to him that he couldn’t just steal your tee, because, you know, that’s bad.”

Billy tore the tee out of Dustin’s hand. “All right, get out!” he stormed. “All of you, out!”

“Hey, easy, man, they’re just kids.”

While Dustin and Steve kept arguing, diverting Billy’s attention, the other kids managed to completely deflate the doll and roll it into a ball that they hastily put into Will’s backpack, and then they stood.

“I’ll try to get over you,” Lucas said as he walked past Billy, “won’t be easy.”

And they all ran outside the house, laughing hysterically.

“All right,” Will said as he hopped on his bike. “Everyone knows the plan. You all separate and take these nosy guys as many places as possible, you don’t look back, you talk to people, get them to ride along, and you stay tuned to channel 6. No communication. I’ll use a code word, like Mirkwood. As soon as we get to Eleven and Hopper, I’ll let you know where to meet.”

“Good luck, guys.”

4. The Raiders of the Lost Arcade

Joyce walked along the same creepy tunnels she'd last ventured to rescue Hopper. She had had to dig a hole in their shack while Will had gone to get his friends, but the tunnels were still there, as dark and cold as she remembered, obscured by the same omnipresent bluish fog. Only the spores that once floated everywhere were reduced to almost inexistent residues of cotton-like flowers. Every surface of the caves was still overgrown with the all-too-familiar ropy, root-like tendrils, but they snapped and broke, dry under her fingers when she touched them.

She had been walking for a half hour or so now, the sensation of losing herself deeper and deeper within the den of an unseizable beast overwhelming her. It seemed to her that a lot more than thirty minutes had passed. Every other gallery looked exactly identical to the one she'd just trudged through. Good thing she trusted Will or she would have gone crazy believing she was going in circles. The breeze around her whistled and moaned. Sometimes as it picked up, Joyce swore the vines moved, untamed, wanting to ensnare her within their grasp.

She shook these thoughts out of her head and tried instead to remember how long it took to drive to Hopper's cabin, making a quick mental calculation to figure out how much longer it would take walk there through these caves. If she didn't want to second-guess their plan, she had to focus on its purpose: helping Hopper.

As if he had read her mind, her walkie-talkie crackled to life and Will's voice piped up. She gasped.

"Keep going, Mom, and at the next intersection you make a right."

"Okay," she whispered.

The slightest noise confounded her senses and tempted her to turn around and check. She felt jumpy, uneasy, but she pressed on.

A foreign noise startled her and she flinched, halted, her neck

stiff as she turned, looking for it. “Hold on and keep quiet, Will,” she breathed into the device.

She switched off her flashlight and crouched against the wall, straining to hear every move, her breath on hold, her hand fisted on the wall as she gripped her flashlight tighter, ready to knock out whatever creature might appear. It had sounded like a cough. As her eyes slowly adapted to the darkness, the air stream curled around her like water, and it felt just as though she was going to drown. She opened her mouth and forced herself to breathe. Slowly. Quietly. She lay there motionless, trying to capture every sound. An indistinct growling echoed through the tunnels again, and Joyce shivered and rubbed the nape of her neck with two fingers. Maybe it was her imagination. Only her imagination. Yes, she decided; she was paranoid and her mind was playing tricks on her. There was nothing here. But, god, this hollow place was affecting her nerves. A coughing noise again, a guttural rasp, this one closer. Oh my god, it couldn't be. She slowly straightened up, her flashlight raised above her shoulder as a weapon. In the shadows, a silhouette. A tall one. Then another, smaller.

“Stay there,” came a whisper, and her heart thumped wildly.

“Hop?” she hoped out loud as she took a shaky step toward the center of the tunnel.

“Jesus, Joyce!” Hopper exclaimed as he switched his light on in her face.

“Oh thank god!” she breathed as she ran her hands over him, hugging her arms around his neck.

He lowered his flashlight. “What are you doing here?” he asked in genuine wonder.

“My god, you're burning up,” she gasped, reaching up to place the back of her hand to his forehead.

“It's all right, it's just the flu or something,” he confirmed.

“You should've called,” she reproached. She pulled the hat off of

his head, looked over at Eleven, hugged her, and put the hat onto the girl's head. "You okay, honey?" Joyce asked, staring at her and stroking her face gently.

Eleven nodded, breathed a small "Yes" and she thumped the shovel she'd been holding over her shoulder onto the ground.

"Will, I'm okay, I found Hopper and Eleven," she said into the walkie.

"Joyce, what are you doing here?" Hopper repeated.

"Are they okay?" Will asked.

"Yes, they're fine." Then to Hopper, "I was coming to get you and help you out of this mess. But why are you here? Didn't you get the message I left with El?"

"Yeah. But I didn't like those helicopters wandering over my roof. What's going on?"

Joyce told them all that she knew, and she gave Hopper a couple tabs of the Ibuprofen she'd brought for him. As she had assumed he would, Hopper was saddened by the news of Dr. Owens' death, and angry, too. She gazed at him as he processed the information. He slowly turned to Eleven and gritted his teeth. The girl had been silently listening to their exchange without interfering, and she was now staring blankly at her father, her eyes wide open, her respiration steady. It seemed to Joyce that even though no words were coming out of their mouths, they were talking to each other, and just for an instant Joyce allowed herself to wonder if Hopper had developed some psychic abilities too during all these isolated months with this special and beautiful child.

"Papa ..." Eleven whispered, not breaking eye contact with Hopper.

Hopper simply nodded, slowly, soberly. Brenner. That had been Joyce's initial thought, too, but she had refrained from mentioning him until everything was clear, although no other name or better explanation had ever come to mind.

Eleven's eyes grew wider Hopper as realization bloomed over her face like blood from a slow knife wound. Joyce could see fear literally drawing upon her face. "I don't want to —" Eleven started with a shaky breath.

Hopper gently pulled her into his embrace and leaned his cheek against the top of her head. "Hey, hey," he said reassuringly, "we're not gonna let him." He put one hand on her shoulder and leveled his eyes with hers as he held her chin up with the other hand. "We are *not* going to let him, understood? You're my daughter now, okay? *My* daughter."

A shiver ran down Joyce's spine. Hopper had already lost a daughter; he couldn't lose two. He hardly ever talked about Sara — Joyce knew he wasn't comfortable with it and he kept it all bottled up inside — but when he said "my daughter" Joyce heard the determination of a man who would die rather than outlive two tragedies in one lifetime.

A long, deep growl reverberated through the tunnels, and Joyce, Hopper and Eleven whirled around together in the direction where the noise had come from.

"What's that?" Eleven whispered.

"It could be a fox, a wolf, anything," Hopper said. "But let's not wait to find out. We don't know if these tunnels are actually safe."

"Where do you want to go? Will said the police are all over the place," Joyce said.

"We hide in plain sight," Hopper replied, and Joyce frowned, confused. "You said they went to your house already, right?"

"They searched it, yeah."

"Good. Then they have their eyes on you, so it's unlikely they'll search it again."

"But Hop ..."

"How about a little trust here?" he asked.

“Don’t be unfair, Hop; you know I trust you with my life. And I’m only here because I care very much about you two.”

He stared at her. “I’m sorry. I know you do. It just seems the best thing to do. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

When they met up with Will, though, the boy shared his mother’s doubts: “No, we can’t stay here. We have to keep moving, keep using these tunnels to our advantage. They probably know they exist, but we know them better than they do and if anyone shows up wherever we decide to hide, we can always go down again like rabbits and go hide somewhere else.”

“He’s right,” Eleven said.

Hopper turned to her, then back to Will. “Okay, kid, where do you suggest we head to, then?”

“Lake Jordan,” Will said resolutely. “It’s secluded, there’s a small cabin, we can spend the night there and figure out what to do next.”

“He’s right,” Dustin said, suddenly appearing further away in the tunnel, and they all turned to him. “The last time we went there, we even brought some blankets and comforters, remember, Will?”

“No! You don’t need to get involved. Any of you,” Hopper said and coughed.

“Yeah we do,” Mike disagreed, and walked past Dustin.

“Why are you here?” Will asked. “I thought we agreed to —”

“Relax,” Dustin replied, “We came through the shelter in my yard. Dart had already done most of the hard work. As far as *they* know, we’re still over there. C’mon, let’s go. There’s nothing to fear here.”

“That’s what scares me,” Hopper replied as they all started moving.

5. The Personal Parenthesis

The kids sat around the small handmade wooden table in the single room of the dented cabin, lit by a spotlight torch that had been placed on a beam overhead, and Dustin emptied his bag of goodies in the center. Joyce hugged herself, stroking her arms up and down self-consciously as she stared at them. This surely wasn't what she had had in mind for her boy's birthday party, but — on the bright side — the people he loved the most would all be here first thing in the morning to wish him a happy birthday. Save for Jonathan and Nancy who were still driving through town, they were all here.

Hopper coughed in his fist and she looked over at him; he was bracing his back against the door, his arms folded over his chest, a somber frown on his face, a frown of disquietude that marred every parent's face every once in a while. He usually had kind, deep blue eyes that smiled even when his mouth didn't, but she could barely make out his eyes now; she could almost feel the weary tension of his body. There was something almost childish about him that made her want to protect him from whatever bully had hurt him. He caught her gaze and held it silently, his features softening as they all started to focus on their next move: How to get Hopper out of this mess without exposing Eleven.

"I know who can hide you," Eleven suddenly broke the silence and turned around on the bench to look at Hopper. "Kali, or ... Eight."

"You said she lived in Chicago, right? We can't go to that far, kid. If we could, there'd be no need to hide. And being on the run isn't a life."

"Especially when you did nothing wrong," Dustin commented.

"Yeah," Will and Lucas agreed.

"We need a plan," Mike said.

"We need proof. Undeniable proof," Hopper said.

“Of what, exactly?” Mike asked.

“That they’re lying, for one. That it was a setup. Evidence of my innocence in the murder.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be presumed innocent until proven guilty?” Dustin asked.

“Yeah. But we’re playing an entirely different kind of game here,” Hopper replied.

“Shoot first and, ask questions later,” Lucas agreed bitterly.

Hopper nodded.

“And two?” Eleven asked.

“What?”

“You said, ‘one, we prove your innocence,’” Will explained.

“Right. And two, evidence that I’m your father.”

There was a silence for a moment or two, and then Mike said, “But how do we get that? You know a blood test would prove otherwise.”

“I know, I know, I’m thinking out loud,” Hopper replied.

“Unless ...” Eleven started, and all heads turned to her. “Unless we beat them at their own game.”

“What do you mean?” Hopper wondered.

“Kali has the ability to create illusions, and I have telekinesis powers; maybe someone else has the ability to make false memories.”

“That would be ... awesome!” Max realized.

Mike’s eyes brightened. “That’s it! She’s right! We plant forged evidence of your innocence in their heads.” Eleven nodded softly at him.

“That’s tricky,” Hopper said.

“But it can work,” Joyce said softly as she looked over at Hopper.

Hopper’s eyes swept to hers and they stared wordlessly at each other. The room fell deathly quiet, in a way that hardly ever happened with these kids; Joyce could feel everyone holding their breath, waiting for his approval as silence filled with tension and kept their excitement in check. As Hopper inwardly assessed the risks he was willing to take for the benefits he was looking for like any chess or poker player would, Joyce urged herself not to blink, offering him the supportive gaze she assumed he needed.

Seconds passed, which felt like hours, until Will tentatively broke the silence:

“Whether this proof exists, there’s only one place where we can find or forge it.”

“The lab compound,” the others said.

“Yes. The lab compound.”

“Ugh,” Hopper sighed. “None of you is going. You’ve been very helpful, but you’ve done enough.”

“Come on!” and “Hopper!” and “Chief, we can’t let you down” and other voices of protests flew throughout the cabin.

“No, it’s just El and me.” He looked at Joyce. “You’re not coming either.”

“Hop ...”

“No!” he shouted. It made him cough.

“You know you can’t stop us,” Will said, sure of himself.

Hopper looked at them in defeat. He pushed himself off the wall. “I need to think,” he said as he opened the door, slamming it behind him as he went out.

Silence.

“Anyone want Life Savers?” Dustin asked, raising a couple of candies from the table, and they all turned angry faces to him. “What? I’m just asking ... Give him time, he’ll come to his senses.”

There was no way Hopper could keep the kids out of it, Joyce realized. Not unless he went all alone and asked them to look after Eleven, but that would never happen. Hopper would never give them that kind of responsibility, lest something happened — God forbid — and they had to live with that guilt their whole lives.

Steve and Lucas helped Joyce move the sparse furniture against the walls, pulling the blankets and comforters on the floor, and she ordered them to “bed”. It wasn’t that late, but they all needed some sleep before tomorrow. They offered to take shifts during the night, but she replied she and Hopper would take care of it.

She waited until all she could hear in the open space of the shack was sleepy breaths and snoring, and then she walked outside with a blanket in hand.

Hopper was sitting on the steps. He turned around when he heard her come out, they stared at each other a second, and then Hopper returned his gaze in front of him as Joyce stepped out and closed the door.

“They’re asleep?” he asked.

“For now,” she replied as she draped the blanket over his squared shoulders.

“Okay.”

“How are you holding up?” Joyce asked.

Hopper wrapped himself into the blanket and looked up at her. He reached his hand out to her as she leaned on his shoulder to sit down next to him.

“I’m sick,” he replied.

“I know. I’ve got more pills if you need.”

“No, I mean I’m sick to my stomach. I don’t get it. This ...” — he scratched his beard nervously — “this never-letting-go ... She’s only a kid. But to them she’s no more than a lab rat.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for warning us by the way.”

“Hey,” she said softly, nudging her shoulder against his.

“I meant it, you know? You don’t have to stay,” he said, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders to share the blanket with her. “You could be in your bed with the heat turned up, a nice steaming cup of cocoa on your nightstand, and Stephen King’s *Talisman* on your knees. Heard it’s good.”

“Yeah,” she smiled ironically, “I’m not sure about that, Hop. Will wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you and Eleven. And I’ve got two stubborn boys who feel pretty much the same about it.”

“Well, if you ever wanna change your mind. Or theirs.”

“You’re kidding, right? That’s not even open for consideration. Drop it.”

He nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

She raised her brows and smiled softly. “I think we’re beyond that, Hop.”

He chuckled, and squeezed her closer to him. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

He took his arm out from behind her back and leaned on his elbows, folding his hands, balled into fists, under his chin as he looked out into the distance where the silvery moon reflected on the quiet lake. She followed his gaze as the forest noises floating through the crisp night air enveloped them. Joyce pulled a cigarette out of her pack and offered it to him.

He waved it off. "Sore throat," he said apologetically.

"Maybe a good time to quit," she smiled.

He nodded and she put it back. "I don't care if you smoke," he said.

"I don't need one."

A dog or another wild animal howled and Hopper sighed. He looked irresolute for a moment, and he lowered his fists to his lap and glanced up at the sky where a heavy cloud hid the moon.

"What?" she whispered.

"If Brenner wants Eleven back, I mean if it's really him out there, I can't let him near her; she'll be drawn to him like protesters to the Vietnam Moratorium march. She'll follow him without a second thought."

"We won't let him, Hop," Joyce murmured. When he didn't answer, she looked up at him and squeezed his hands. "Hey," she said softly again, and he tilted his face to her. "We won't let him."

"No, we won't," he whispered back with little conviction.

"Besides, she's here," Joyce said softly. "And she's safe." He looked at her absently. "Remember two years ago when Will went missing? You're the one who comforted me. You're the one who didn't think I was a crazed orc, the one who trusted me. The one who wouldn't let me consider even for one second that we wouldn't find him. You never gave up on Will, not even when he was at death's door." She added fiercely, "And you never gave up on me."

"Those fucking bastards," he muttered suddenly through gritted teeth and stood up as if she had said nothing.

Startled, she stared at him as he faltered across the porch. "Hop," she called and she got to her feet and crossed to the opposite edge of the porch where he'd stopped at her voice. "She's got you, and you're the best thing that could have happened to her."

His face wore a stern, almost angry expression. “Am I, really?”

“What? Hop, of course you are.” He shook his head slowly, crossing his arms over his chest, hands underneath his armpits, and stared at his feet. “Tell me what’s wrong cause you’re scaring me. This isn’t you: you don’t give up.”

“No?”

“No,” she replied, her eyes locked on his with resolve. “Never say die, Hop.”

“What if I’m cursed? —”

“What?” She breathed as he continued.

“— What if I can’t protect her from this sick son of a bitch?” he asked angrily, whirling around toward the lake again.

“You’re not cursed; you’re sick, that’s what you are,” she replied, a bit more bitterly and loudly than she’d anticipated. She stroked his back and felt the heat from his fever even through the multiple layers of clothing. “And you’re not thinking clearly.”

“Oh no, I am,” he replied.

“Hopper, look at me,” she said at his back. “Look at me!” she repeated more urgently when he didn’t turn around.

“What?” he asked wearily as he obediently faced her again, bracing his hands against the planks that served as a railing.

She opened her eyes wide and shook her head. “What’s going on, Hopper?”

“You should take the kids and go home.”

“What? No!”

“Lower your voice, Joyce; you’re going to wake the kids.”

“Well, then wake up, Hop! Get ahold of yourself,” she replied,

slapping his chest.

“Joyce.”

“You know what? Shit happens. But you deal with it!” She quickly lit a cigarette. “*WE* deal with it!”

“Joyce,” he tried again softly.

She stared at him defiantly. “Damn it, Hop!” She said, slapping his chest again. “I mean, god, she’s got a full army of kids more than willing to protect her and not let anything happen to her.”

“Yeah, and I don’t want them around.”

“Damn it, Hopper, let it go!”

“I can’t, Joyce! I *am* cursed!”

“You’re *not* cursed, damn it, stop saying that! You are *sick*! You have a *fever*!”

“I’m a walking fucking black hole! Everything I touch, everyone I care for, they suffer, vanish, or die! So get the hell away from me before it’s too late.”

She stared at him as he walked away, watching as he hunched against the wall of the house, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. She turned around and went to him, saying, “You’re generous and kind and caring, and you’re the most selfless, bravest man I’ve ever known. If anything happens because of you, it’s for the better.” Tears were stinging her eyes. How could he not see how good he was? “Hopper, god damn it, I am not going to let you go with that in your —” she raised her hand to pummel him again in frustration, anger building inside her.

But this time he caught her wrist, hurled her against him, and shut her mouth with an abrupt kiss that took her breath away, clamped her eyes shut, and made her heart pound violently. Then, just as quickly, he pulled back before she had the time to process what had happened. He stared at her when she opened her eyes to him. In the brief moment their eyes met, once past the shock, she outlined a

whole palette of feelings in his eyes: from wonder to self-restraint, from frustration to want.

Not wanting to hear him say he was sorry, and not wanting him to turn away again, she leaned closer and brought her mouth to his again. Hell, she wasn't one bit sorry. His breath brushed against her skin, and a frisson, like a jolt of heat, raced down her spine. She wanted to kiss him for what he was worth, which for the last year and a half had been everything to her, but just as she lingered her tongue along his lips, he pulled back again. She searched his dark blue eyes, darker than usual because of the night or, she liked to believe, underlying desire. The way he gazed at her like he was trying to puzzle something out, as if to clarify what was going on, reassured her at once. He enclosed her face with his large hands, inclined his head, and, closing his eyes, covered her mouth with his again as he exhaled sharply.

She fluttered her eyes shut too, and grabbed his coat in her fists, pressing herself against him, feeling his fever spreading from beneath his clothes. His beard and mustache tickled around her lips as she drunk in the masculine scent of his cologne. His hands still on her face, he thumbed her cheeks as she tilted her head to deepen the kiss. Her chest tightened, her breath came in short gasps, her insides knotted, and her skin tingled as if a thousand hands were caressing her. Holding her tight, he slid down along the wall, coming down to a sitting position, and she straddled him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and she unzipped his coat so that she could nestle against his warmth, and their mouths opened wide, allowing their tongues to meet and tangle, battling a little for dominance until she let out the softest moan. She held on tight, seeking a deeper kiss as his breath came in short pants. Just for a second, she wondered if he could breathe from his nose with his cold, but he didn't seem to wane. In any case, her heart was beating hard, and she herself was starting to struggle for air, so she grudgingly pulled back.

She felt flushed when she broke the kiss, gazing deeply at him and lingering her palm on his face.

"God, I've missed you," he breathed as he buried his face in the

crook of her neck around which she looped up her arms.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and closed her eyes, inhaling and exhaling deeply to catch her breath and steady her racing heart, allowing long ago memories never forgotten to invade her mind. "I've missed you, too." Once upon a time, she'd buried these memories beneath layers of regret, resentment, and wounded pride, but then she'd made peace with them long ago. They were kids back then. Only kids. It had hardly meant anything, and certainly not meant to last forever. But whatever Hopper had just meant, she'd missed him more in the last few weeks than she would have thought possible.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm okay," he said with a kind smile. "Thanks for making me come to my senses."

"Any time," she smiled.

He kissed her neck and cautiously took her face in his hands again, gazing at her. "Are *you* okay?"

"Don't I look okay?"

"You want me to answer that?" he asked humoredly.

"Hmm ..."

"Your face is flushed," he smiled, "but I don't think you have a fever."

"Oh god," she said as she covered her face with her hands, laughing and resting her forehead against his chin, and he stroked the back of her head, pushing his own against the wood and inhaling deeply as he looked into the distance.

They sat together in silence for a while, appreciating the proximity and the tenderness of the moment as he enveloped her whole small frame in his strong arms.

"Come on," he said suddenly, and he got to his feet, pulling her up with him, "let's try and get some sleep. I'm beat."

“Oh my god,” she exclaimed.

“Shh, don’t wake the kids,” he said as she put her feet on the floor and he kissed her again for several minutes.

They entered the cabin in silence, with an odd, albeit familiar feeling of being teenagers coming back after sneaking out under their parents’ supervision, and Hopper locked the door behind him. The kids were sleeping in what looked like a pile of dirty laundry.

Joyce lowered herself on the comforters the kids had saved for them and lay down. Hopper kneeled next to her and scooped her up in his arms, draping the blanket he had picked up from the porch over them both.

She nestled against him as he wrapped one arm around her shoulders, kissing the top of her head and whispering “By the way, I’m sorry in advance if your nose starts running, if you feel like your clothes become damp with fever, or if you can’t stop coughing; this damn winter got me. Good night, Joyce.”

“Good night, Hop,” she smiled.

After a second, he whispered again, “You know, I could get used to this, too.”

“Too?”

“You know, after El.”

“Then do.”

“I might. And by the way, I’m not the best thing that could have happened to her; *she’s* the best thing that happened to me.”

“Yes, she is. You both are.”

She closed her eyes, warmth spreading throughout her entire body as he rested his lips on her forehead. Just before she fell asleep, she heard the REO Speedwagon song replay in her head.

“Cause I feel so secure when we’re together. You give my life direction.

You make everything so clear —”

6. Not A Foxhole

“Jim, wake up.”

The urgent voice in her ears, the soft shake of her body, the masculine scent in her nostrils; the inkling that something was out of the ordinary tugged Joyce out of a deep sleep. Upon opening her eyes, she saw Eleven hovering over her, and she instantly remembered how she had fallen asleep the night before: in Hopper’s arms where her head was still pillowing over his shoulder.

“Wake up,” Eleven repeated. “They’re here,” and at the same time Joyce heard the roaring of a helicopter nearby.

Hopper opened his eyes too, and they locked on Joyce’s. He propped himself up onto his elbow, his keen attention shifting from her eyes to her lips and back again. Only slightly embarrassed by the fact that a handful of kids had watched them sleep nuzzling each other, they put the world on hold an instant, their brief and silent exchange assuring and reassuring them that everything was going to be okay. Then he grabbed his gun next to their blankets, got to his feet, and Joyce eased herself up as well.

“Get away from the windows,” he said as he took the kids’ place and peered toward the sky. “Okay. They’re circling on the other side of the lake. Won’t take long before they spot this cabin. We gotta get out of here now.”

Gathering their stuff, every one followed Joyce outside and around the house toward the hole they had dug the previous night and Hopper closed the line, picking up the shovel they’d left behind and tossing it to Steve.

Once they were all down, Will took out his sheets of paper again and Lucas shined his flashlight on them. They were surprised by how dark it was compared to their upper world where the sun had now set in a flawless sky. Will estimated they had about sixty to eighty minutes to walk before they reached the compound.

Since the tunnels were narrow, the line of hikers organized itself

naturally. Hopper was front with Eleven at his heels, then came the boys, Max, and Steve, and Joyce was last. Except for Eleven and Steve, they all had a flashlight.

The hike was uneventful for the first half hour. They were silent. Even Dustin seemed to have realized the gravity of the situation and wasn't his usual jokester self. At one point, they heard from Jonathan and Nancy. The two had driven until late at night and they'd come home to the Byers' to rest. They had decided to skip school. And Jonathan didn't forget to wish his brother a happy and as-little-adventurous-as-possible birthday.

"Man! That's right!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Happy birthday, dude," Mike said, tapping Will's back, joined by the rest of the party.

But a growling noise interrupted them all at once. At first, Lucas and Steve thought it was coming from Dustin's stomach because they hadn't had time to get breakfast, but Hopper waved them off, pulled them to a stop and stood still.

"Shut up," he whispered urgently.

The uneasy, thunderous rhythm of their slowed exhalations lingered along the walls. For a brief moment, Joyce imagined them as bowel walls. A heavy silence reigned no more when echoed among a small group of kids, but when a loud and heavy breathing foretelling some impending, unspeakable disaster was heard, no one felt like smiling anymore.

There was another growl, and Hopper spun around toward the end of the line, flashing his light in the new direction to catch sight of the source of the sound.

"GRRR ..."

It sounded like a wild animal; a fox perhaps, a big grizzly bear most likely, but there were no grizzly bears in Indiana, least of all in Hawkins woods. They were all frozen like statues, afraid to move, straining to hear and see, looking past Joyce in the dark-blue haze of

the cave.

“Is this where we start running?” Dustin whispered.

Her eyes fixed, her face slightly tilted downward, and her brows creased with determination, Eleven slowly stepped forward.

“El,” Hopper called, holding out his hand, trying to grip the edge of her coat and failing. “Shit,” he muttered, and lumbered after her.

As the low, guttural, and menacing noise was heard again, closer than ever, Eleven passed Mike, Will, Lucas, Max, Dustin, and then Steve. Joyce stared briefly at her as the girl halted by her side, her gaze unwavering in the distance.

“Kid,” Hopper whispered again as he stood behind Joyce and Eleven, aiming his gun and flashlight into the hollowed tunnel, “we’re not doing anything stupid.”

Eleven didn’t reply, didn’t look back at him.

There was another long growling noise as a massive shadow appeared at the end of the cave.

“Oh my god,” Joyce muttered between her teeth, her heart hammering in her chest and her legs giving out.

“What is that?” Steve wondered as he peered from above Joyce’s shoulder.

“Fuck,” Hopper said, “I hate it when I’m right. Why does it always have to be monsters?”

“Did anyone think to bring their D&D manual?” Lucas murmured.

Hopper tightened his grip on his gun while all the flashlights now pointed toward the beast still partly hidden in the darkness.

“Um, guys ...” started Dustin, but he swallowed whatever he had to say and his voice died away.

From what they could see, it was a three-headed beast and it prowled

in their direction in a dog-like manner. Steve raised the shovel above everyone's heads.

"Watch out," Dustin said.

"Sorry," Steve replied.

"Take this, kid," Hopper urged Will, handing his flashlight to him, and he gripped his gun with both hands.

Hopper aimed, and then he shot. Once. Joyce didn't even register that the gunshot had hurt her ears. She couldn't take her eyes off the beast which flinched slightly, and then came a muffled cry. The cry rapidly became louder as the shadows of the monster's heads rose again. From loud it became piercing, so piercing that the group had to cover their ears for an instant. Suddenly, the monster leapt out of the darkness and stood in an imposing and threatening stance a few feet from them.

It was even more terrifying than what they had imagined. It was so big it filled the entire tunnel. Nasty-looking snake-things coiled from his snouts, necks, and front paws. His six eyes flared like fire.

"The hound of Hades," Mike whispered in frightened awe.

"Cerberus," confirmed Will.

Hopper shot again, hit his target, but the animal didn't budge this time.

"GRRR ..." it growled as if ready to jump and maul them all in just three simultaneous bites.

From the corner of her eye, Joyce saw Eleven's arm slowly raising and she turned her face to the girl. As she did, she met Hopper's gaze. His mouth was closed, he breathed steadily through his nose, and his eyes were focused. He was quiet. Calm in an almost serene way. Considering how desperate she'd seen him last night, how he could so easily lose his temper, it was reassuring. As for her, she felt like she had a bitter taste in her mouth, a taste of frustration, a sense of helplessness. He turned his attention back to Eleven and then to the monster, and Joyce did the same after she'd reached for Will's hand

which she squeezed gently.

They watched as Eleven channeled her will and energy toward the critter. Her hand outstretched, slightly shaky, she began to cast her mind powers. Soon enough, the beast flung backward as if it were on a slippery slope. Eleven tilted her chin down more, blood running out of her nose, and she kept pushing the three-headed beast with her mind. The monster screeched, its heads spinning uncontrollably, knocking against the walls, dust and rocks falling everywhere, and when it finally realized that it couldn't do anything, that it couldn't beat her, it briskly retreated.

Joyce let out a sigh of relief when the beast was out of sight. She dropped Will's hand. She hadn't realized she'd been squeezing so firmly. She stretched her fingers and her shoulders relaxed, too. Eleven, on the other hand, still looked just as tense and deep in concentration as before. Hopper put his gentle hand on her shoulder, and her features instantly weakened as she turned to him, her legs giving way, and he gathered her in his arms. He lowered himself to the ground with her on his knees, and he wiped her nose with his shirt and held her tight.

"It's okay," he whispered as he held her head against his chest, "you were amazing." He rocked her softly. "I've got you, kid. I've got you."

"Phew!" Lucas exclaimed.

"That wasn't so bad ... was it?" Dustin said.

"That ... was *not* a fox," Steve realized.

"Wow!" Max breathed; she still looked as though she couldn't believe what her eyes had just witnessed. "Mind-blowing!"

Some looked at her disapprovingly. Joyce squeezed Hopper's shoulder and left her hand there when he laid his on it, and they gazed at one another knowingly.

7. Hoaxbusters

The festered rift was as Hopper had described they'd left it after Eleven had closed the gate: the edges fused, glued together. But as they all looked up at it from the pit of the well-like hole, bones or — some would think — fortune cookies cracking beneath their shoes, Joyce had never considered it could have been so huge.

“It looks like an old scar,” Lucas commented.

“It is,” Hopper asserted coldly. He moved over and rested his hand over Eleven's shoulder and looked down at her affectionately. “You okay?”

Eleven looked up into his caring eyes, hers were cold and closed off as if to protect herself from past memories, and she nodded. Her impassive gaze strayed past him toward the small metal cage elevator that hung up high above them, and the party watched as she commanded it down with her mind.

Hopper kept his worried gaze on Eleven as the group herded inside, and Joyce understood that whatever dreadful events that had taken place here were still very fresh, at least in Hopper's mind. While Eleven didn't show anything — unless her extreme dispassionate demeanor was her very way to try to suppress her anxiety —, Hopper was struggling to find the balance between opposite conflicts: the desire to give his girl some space and the fear of keeping himself too far away and not being there when she needed him. He closed the small gate, Dustin pressed the button on the remote panel, and to everyone's surprise, the electricity was still on; they went up without Eleven's psychic intervention.

Moments later, Hopper, Joyce, and the kids were wandering the same halls where the terrible and unfair battle had occurred six months earlier. Joyce inhaled sharply as she found herself unable to rid herself of the memories of Bob's horrible fate even though there were no longer any signs of the past violence. The corridors were silent and empty, the walls and floor had been washed, and even the air felt fresh and healthy, especially when one came from the harrowing tunnels in which they'd spent over an hour. The temperatures were

warmer too, she noticed as Hopper unzipped his coat.

She walked on, staring at her feet, Hopper's chatter by her side becoming more and more indistinct, his voice distorted and distant in her ear as she lost herself more deeply in the reminiscences of her numerous appointments with Dr. Owens, the state of life-or-death emergency Will was in the last time she'd brought him in, the night fatal to Bob, and before that her and Hopper's captivity before those people agreed to let them enter that creepy gap in the wall to go looking for Will.

"Hey," Hopper's voice was clear again, and it took her out of her musings.

She stared absently at him for the few seconds, blinking back to the present, and then she glanced over to where the kids were opening every single door in search of the archives room.

"Hey," she replied finally, her voice weak and her lips still trembling a little.

He did a double take at her, and then he grabbed her elbow and pulled her aside in a corner, making her look at him while she crossed her arms in a defensive stance. "Hey, what's wrong?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay."

He arched a brow, his mouth tensed in a flat line. "Joyce ..." he warned gently.

In spite of the shivering cold sensation her memories had brought up, the huskiness in his voice warmed her up, and she unfolded her arms to reach up to him and stroke his arm. "It's just ... I remembered, uh, I just remembered Bob. I'll be okay ..."

"Oh, Joyce, I'm so sorry," he said, and hugged her.

No, she thought, he shouldn't be sorry. This wasn't on him; he had done nothing that night but what he could to help Bob — and everyone else. But her throat was too tight to get out the words.

"I'm okay," she repeated softly, her hand on his chest as she

pulled back, glanced up at him, and offered him a smile that she was sure didn't quite reach her eyes.

He said nothing, just stared at her as if to make sure she really was. If wanting to burn this place to the ground and put these guys behind bars where they belonged was normal, then she *was* "okay". She rested her head against him, soothed as she felt the soft booms of his heartbeat. His fever had broken, at least that was something. She smoothed her palm over his chest and he gently pressed his own on it.

"Do you think —?" Joyce wondered in a low voice. "I mean, that ... that *thing* that we saw down there, where did it come from? Do you think there's another breach somewhere?"

Hopper considered for a second. "All living organisms ..." he started, murmuring into her hair, sounding as if he was trying to remember something. "All living organisms develop defense mechanisms against attack. They adapt. They find some way to survive."

"What?" she asked and looked at him.

He took her hands. "That's something Owens said to me."

"What does that mean?" she breathed.

"It means maybe this, um, this Cerberus as Will called it, found another way."

"If it's not a gate, then what is it? How did it get out?"

"I don't —"

"Guys!" Will's voice echoed through the hall. "Over here!"

Hopper and Joyce glanced at one another, and hastened to where Will's voice had come from.

"It's locked," Will said.

"Has to be the one," Mike agreed.

Hopper pulled his gun out from his lower back, asked the kids to step back, shot the lock off, and Lucas pushed the door opened.

“Oh, Jesus,” Hopper muttered.

It was a big, 100-square-foot room, give or take, and Hopper slowly stepped inside with his mouth open in a grotesque muted cry, his brisk eyes staring wide. That was a mask of disbelief Joyce had seen once before; the day Hopper had come to her house and had eyed with bewilderment the amount of colorful light bulbs — no, *insane* amount of light bulbs — he’d had to unscrew in order to find the bugs he’d been expecting to find. No Christmas lights here, but walls covered with metal shelves filled with boxes, rows and rows of folders, and archive drawers like the newspaper ones they used at the Hawkins Public Library.

Hopper sighed and trod forward clumsily. “Ugh, shit, Marissa would come in handy so much right now.”

“Marissa?” Eleven asked quietly.

“Yeah, you know, the, um, librarian,” he looked at her, but she didn’t seem to understand. “Never mind, she’s not here anyway.” He clapped his hands cheerfully and said, “All right, kids, let’s get to work.”

They searched the cabinets and drawers and boxes and everything else they could get their hands on. There were just so many papers to go through with little clue as to what they were looking for. They dug into everything. Opened every box and folder. Went through every single piece of paperwork, and slowly the yellowish linoleum flooring was covered with a carpet of paperwork.

Sitting on her knees with papers scattered all around her, Joyce picked up a document and brought it to her eyes for closer inspection. It was a photo, a black-and-white photograph like the many hard prints Jonathan developed under a faint red light. This one must have been stapled to a sheet of paper before because one corner was ripped out, but at the moment it was just the one photograph.

“Hop?” Joyce called out, keeping her eyes on the photo. It couldn’t be *her*, it didn’t make sense. Hopper knelt next to her and she looked up at him, her eyes filled with concern. “Isn’t that ...?”

His eyes immediately fixed on it, and she knew the answer. He frowned, looking unsure, incredulous, or wary; Joyce couldn’t tell. “Yeah,” he breathed, slowly taking the picture in his hands.

“I don’t understand. How is she ...?” she whispered.

He shook his head, his eyes still on the photo. “I ... I have no idea why they’d have her picture in here.” He flipped it around, looking for an inscription on the back but there was none. “Wasn’t there a document attached to it?”

“Didn’t see it. That’s how I found it.”

“Son of a bitch!” he exclaimed, and he began to frantically rummage through the papers in front of Joyce.

“I might be onto something here,” Mike exclaimed.

Hopper looked over at Mike but his eyes were drawn to the photograph again. Joyce leaned on his shoulder, squeezed it gently, and stood painfully.

“Listen to this,” Mike said as he started reading. “Three: Subject can control memories of herself and others, allowing her to modify, fabricate, suppress, influence, restore, or erase them. Annotations: None. Status: Retired (1978).”

“Is this for real?” Max asked.

“According to this one, I believe it’s very ‘for real’.” Mike looked over at Hopper who had finally joined the rest of the party, and he handed the next sheet to him. Mike’s gaze seemed to say “I’m sorry.”

Hopper took the document and started reading: “Eleven.” He stopped, his breath catching, and glanced at Mike who encouraged him to continue with a small nod. “Subject can influence, manipulate, move objects with her mind. She can also reach targets a lot further away than we had imagined and report word for word what they say.

Annotations: None. Status: Escaped, aged 12 (1983). Last known location: Hawkins, Indiana.”

“I found this one, too. Five: Subject can take over the mind of others. Not accompanied by the target switching bodies. Annotations: Failure. Subject has changed minds so many times she no longer knows which body is her own. Next subject should attempt to inhabit more than one mind at a time, producing a Hive Mind. Annotations: None. Status: Subject assumed deceased, aged 15 (1978).”

“Oh my god,” Joyce whispered.

“Like mind hopping?” Max asked with her eyes wide open.

“Nine,” Mike continued reluctantly. “That’s the last one I found. Subject can warp the fabric of reality according to his beliefs. Annotations: At the time he escaped, subject was on the verge of becoming able to achieve nearly anything if he believed it. Status: Escaped, aged 13 (1980). Last known location: New York, NY.”

“I know him,” Eleven said softly, her eyes out of focus and her breathing deeper. “I *know* him,” she repeated with more certainty, staring up at Hopper.

“What do you mean? How?” Hopper asked.

“I’ve met him here. We did sessions together. He taught me things, helped me develop my abilities. He was ... nice.”

“‘Helped you?’” Hopper repeated bitterly.

She nodded. “He was older than me. I remember his face. He had brown eyes like me, but ... but their shape was different, like —” She slowly stuck her fingers up in the corners of her eyes and pulled them back.

“Asian type,” Mike said, his voice bright with concentration and excitement.

“I can get in touch with him,” Eleven said, looking at Hopper, “even without a photo. His name is Wan Li.”

“How does he have a name when you didn’t know yours?” Dustin asked.

Eleven shrugged her shoulders.

“Probably he was taken at an age that allowed him to remember it,” Joyce said.

“But wait, from the description of his powers, what if ... what if he’s the reason for the monsters? What if he created them?” Will asked.

There was a silence as they all considered this.

“But El is right,” Mike argued. “If he really can alter reality with his beliefs, he’s Hopper’s best chance to come clean and Eleven’s to be free again. All we need to do is convince him that ... I don’t know, Owens isn’t dead and no girl was kidnapped.”

“Yeah, we don’t even know how Dr. Owens was killed,” Lucas agreed.

“*If* he was even killed,” Dustin said.

“Do you want to try that?” Joyce asked Hopper.

They all stared at Hopper who was himself looking at Eleven, very unsure of what to decide.

“I can do it,” she told him resolutely, “I can get in touch with him. Let me do it.”

Joyce knew that Hopper’s head must be spinning, but eventually Hopper agreed, and they all went silent as Hopper covered Eleven’s eyes with Lucas’s woodland camouflage bandana.

After a few minutes, they heard a young man’s voice in the walkie, “Eleven?”

“Wan Li!” she exclaimed.

“Eleven?” the crackled voice said again, and everyone in the

archives room held their breath. “I can’t believe you found me! It’s so good to see you. It’s been so long. Look at you; you look so ... grown up now.”

“I need you Wan Li,” Eleven breathed.

“Why? What’s up?”

“I ran away, too. But he’s ... he’s coming for me.”

Hopper was the only one standing, everyone else was sitting or kneeling around Eleven. But he couldn’t stand sitting still: he breathed, paced nervously, and tangled his hands behind his head, and Joyce looked at him anxiously, trying to catch his gaze and offer him support. But his eyes remained on Eleven the whole time.

“Can you ... come to me?”

“Where are you?” Wan Li’s voice buzzed through the walkie-talkie in Mike’s hand.

“I’m at the lab. Hawkins National Laboratory.”

“I can,” Wan Li replied, his voice becoming more and more difficult to hear, “but it will... take ... time.”

“Ask him to will himself here,” Mike whispered to Eleven as he tried to pull the antenna of the walkie all the way up for better reception, but it was already entirely out.

“Can you ... will yourself here, Wan Li?” Eleven repeated.

“I haven’t done that in so long, Eleven, I’m out of sha—”, the radio crackled again. “But if — *scrack scrack scraaaacccckkkkk* — be there.”

Joyce, Hopper and the others looked at Mike, urging him wordlessly to do something about the walkie.

“Me?” Eleven asked, on the verge of tears.

“Yeah ... *Crrr*—”

Eleven and the radio went silent. Her forehead creased, and she hunched forward on her knees, her hands balling into fists above her chest. All of a sudden, a little puff of grey smoke appeared in front of Eleven, and Joyce and Dustin hurried to their feet and stepped back as the smoke grew bigger and thicker until Wan Li materialized in the archives room. Everyone who was still sitting stood in amazement.

He looked just like the document had said: a young man around eighteen years old with the black almond-shaped eyes Eleven had mimicked. He was tall and slender, and wore a hooded sweatshirt and a white Yankee ball cap which covered shiny black hair.

Eleven took the bandana off her eyes and stared at him a second as one corner of the young man's mouth curled up, and she leaned forward to him, drained and crying slightly as they hugged.

Then she wiped her eyes and he helped her stand. She presented him to every one of her friends, and then she turned to Hopper.

“And that's, uh, that's Jim Hopper, my father.”

Wan Lin turned to Hopper to shake his hand but the young man's face suddenly contracted, growing grave and tense. His hand stopped midway and then he pushed it forward. “Hi, sir, nice to meet you,” he said, unable to hide the troubled look clouding his eyes. “Your father?” he asked Eleven with a frown.

“Adoptive father,” Hopper and Eleven said at once.

“Oh ... Okay.”

Joyce wondered what had just happened, but Hopper didn't ask. Yet, she couldn't believe he hadn't noticed the way his face had changed from expressions of amazement to glee to ... what had she seen? Fear? Panic? Her mind was busy trying to recreate his face while Eleven started to explain to Wan Li why they needed his help.

She gave up trying to figure it out when she heard her son ask: “I'm sorry, but I must ask. The monsters ... Did you create them? With your mind, I mean? By accident maybe, or, I don't know.”

“No, the monsters were never my creation,” Wan Li said. He

turned to Eleven, his voice quieter and sincere. “You were so scared each time you had to go into the bath, each time you had to wander alone in the darkness after someone. You were just a kid, Eleven. No one can blame you for this.”

Hopper frowned and hesitated, and Joyce wasn’t sure she heard the young man right either. “What are you saying?” He asked.

“Her greatest fears overtook her. When she couldn’t outrun them anymore, she delved into them and they shaped those monsters. She ... She created them.” He turned to Eleven again and held her hand. “I’m so sorry you had to go through this.”

8. The Third Eye

“If what you’re saying is accurate, then I might have a plan,” Wan Li said. “But it’s dangerous.”

“Shoot,” Hopper said from the far back of the room where he stood with his arms crossed over his chest against the wall.

“If it’s really Brenner who’s after you, then he’ll be monitoring every possible audio feed, but not sharing it with the local authorities. We need him to know where you are.”

“What? Why?”

“So that he comes to her.”

“No,” Eleven whispered in fear, shaking her head.

“I know, I know. But once he’s here, I can erase his memory.”

Hopper turned to Mike. “I thought you said that was Three’s power?” Mike rapidly looked at his document and nodded. “But you’re not Three,” Hopper said as he stared at Wan Li again.

“No,” he admitted, “I was Nine.”

“And from what I understand, you couldn’t come here on your own either; it was Eleven who willed you here.”

“I know, I know. Well, maybe she can work Brenner’s mind.”

“No, she can’t, she won’t. Not him. He had too much influence over her, it’ll never work.”

“But with our combined energies, it will; it will work.”

“No! I’m not taking that risk!”

“I’ve been mentoring her for years, she *knows* me, she *trusts* me.”

“Sure she did! Over five years ago!”

“Why do you want him to come here?” Eleven asked softly.

“Kid, I said no,” Hopper said, and walked over to them.

“Hop, let him talk before you make a definitive decision,” Joyce said.

Hopper sighed — if his eyes could kill, Joyce thought, Wan Li would be dead before long — and Wan Li started to explain. “You call someone for ... whatever pretext, it doesn’t matter just as long as Brenner hears you, to pick you up or something ... Brenner comes here and we brainwash him, you and me. It’ll be like he’s never known you. Never seen you before. We can have him convinced of his own guilt, we can have him confessing to all the horrors that took place here. Then we call the local authorities and they can arrest him. Then you’ll be free, both of you. And me, too.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Hopper grumped again. Everyone was quiet and grave. “What? Am I the only one here who sees how dangerous this stupid plan is?” He leaned forward to Eleven, his hands on his knees, and leveled his eyes with hers. “This is stupid, and we’re not stupid, remember?”

“But I want him ... gone,” she whispered.

“And so do I, kid,” he replied, grabbing her shoulders and staring into her eyes as a promise, “I want him out of the picture, too! But not like this. We can find another way.”

“Oh yeah?” Dustin asked. “Like what?”

“Like what?” Hopper repeated. “I don’t know like what. I’ll go to the station and explain everything —”

“No,” Eleven breathed.

“Oh yeah? What happens to El once you’re sentenced to life in jail? Or worse?” Mike asked bitterly.

“— I’ll show them the birth certificate —” Hopper continued, ignoring everyone’s comments.

“The one Dr. Owens forged, you mean?” Lucas asked.

“I’ll ... I’ll ...” Hopper stammered. “Come on! There’s gotta be something else! The initial plan was to plant forged evidence, not to ge—”

“We don’t even know how Dr. Owens was killed,” Steve reminded him, cutting him off. “That’s kinda complicated.”

The room went quiet. Everyone stared at one another. Everyone’s eyes pleaded with the others to come up with something.

“So ...” Wan Li started, breaking the uncomfortable, heavy silence. “Who you gonna call?”

“Jonathan!” Will said.

Joyce witnessed as Hopper helplessly sagged against the wall and dropped his head and hands between his knees while Mike called Jonathan, asking him to come pick them up. She witnessed as Eleven crossed to her father and crouched next to him. Joyce felt a tug in her heart as she witnessed their shared distraught features.

Hopper raised his head and cocked it to the side to look at Eleven. He took off his hat, put it on her head, and lay his arm around her small shoulders. Sighing, he lifted his head, bracing it against the wall, and blankly gazed around the room and most likely contemplated when their plan had turned so shitty. Eleven nestled against his side and he self-consciously rubbed her upper arm.

“Now what?” Max asked.

“Now we wait,” Hopper replied.

At one point, Hopper kissed Eleven’s temple and got up. He crossed determinedly to where Joyce had found the black-and-white photograph earlier, and he picked it up.

He walked over to where Wan Li was sitting on the floor, and put it in front of his eyes, looking down at the kid. “Do you know her?”

Wan Li looked up defiantly at Hopper, and then he glanced at the

photo, took it, and nodded as he again stared into Hopper's eyes. "They called her 'Third Eye'."

Joyce's heart jolted.

Hopper threw his head backward in shock. "Third Eye?"

She must have looked just as stunned as Hopper. She put her hands onto her knees and stood slowly and walked over to them quietly, feeling like she'd fallen into another realm of reality.

"Yes," Wan Li replied simply.

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know how it started. I don't know whether they called her that because she was the third, or if she only became Three after they found Four, Five, Six, etcetera, etcetera. I don't know if there ever was a One or a Two. If that's the case, I'd never heard of them. Never seen them."

"Why Third Eye?" Joyce asked.

"The third eye refers to the gate that leads to the inner realms and spaces of higher consciousness. It often symbolizes a state of enlightenment or the evocation of mental images having deeply personal spiritual or psychological significance." He turned to look at Hopper. "You suffered post-traumatic stress disorder after Nam, didn't you?"

"How do y—?"

"Three, she was what...? Your shrink? Hypnotist?"

"What?" Hopper asked, his breath short.

"Studies have shown that Vietnam veterans with PTSD have higher than normal hypnotizability scores on standardized tests. Anyway, how long did you suffer from PTSD? Not long, I guess. Three was so good."

"What are you saying?" Hopper asked, as if he actually needed

more to understand what the boy was saying. “And how do you know I fought in the Vietnam War?”

“Did you ever ask yourself why you barely suffered from PTSD compared to your companions?”

“Who is she?” Mike wondered out loud. “What are we talking about?”

When she heard Mike’s voice, Joyce remembered they weren’t alone. Even Eleven had stood, and neither she nor Hopper had registered it.

Hopper looked at the boy for an instant before he started emotionlessly: “He’s talking about my ex-wife.”

“What?” Mike breathed.

“Your ex-wife was Three?” Dustin said as if he weren’t sure he heard correctly.

“Are you saying she altered my memories?” Hopper asked Wan Li.

He nodded. “Your memories of the war, yeah, she made them more bearable. At least these ones.”

“There were ... others?”

Joyce could almost see the smoke coming slowly out of Hopper’s ears and nose. His face was growing red with anger.

“We’ve met before, you know,” Wan Li replied softly, ignoring Hopper’s question, staring down at the ex-wife’s photo.

Hopper tore the photo out of Wan Li’s hands and threw it behind him. “Tell me what other memories have been altered ...” he menaced as Eleven slowly bent down behind his back to pick up the photograph and stared at it.

“You most likely don’t remember me but, um, I met you in this very place before, sir. I must not have been more than ten. You were crying ... in the stairwell over there.” Hopper’s jaw tightened. He

seemed to swallow hard and to have difficulty breathing. The other man looked at him. "You didn't even realize, did you?"

"What is he saying?" Eleven asked.

"You didn't recognize this place the first time you came back here?" Wan Li pushed him further to the edge.

Hopper spun around, gave Eleven a quick glance, and turned back to Wan Li, gritting his teeth. "He's saying my ex-wife may have been the first test subject. He's saying my daughter may have been another one. He's saying that my daughter may not have died, at least not from cancer."

"Did you even remember she'd been treated here?" Wan Li asked.

Hopper clenched his fists, kneeled next to the boy, and took a deep breath. "Is she alive?"

Wan Li shook his head and closed his eyes. "I don't know."

"Jim ..." Eleven said, her face puckered as if she was ready to cry.

Hopper harshly grabbed Wan Li by the collar and pulled him to his feet, shoving him against the wall as he shouted, "IS SHE ALIVE?"

Eleven covered her ears, and Joyce hurried to Hopper's side and put her hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know," Wan Li repeated, close to crying.

"Hop," Joyce called softly, "let him go." He turned to her, trying hard to compose himself. She kept her voice as gentle as possible. "One thing at a time; first we clear your name, and then if Sara is still out there somewhere, we'll find her."

"All I can tell you is that she was alive when I escaped in 1980."

Hopper choked and let the other man loose. "1980 ... that's two years after I saw her die. I SAW HER DIE! RIGHT BEFORE ME ..."

“I know ...”

Joyce looked around at the confused looks on everyone’s faces.

“I’m sorry,” Hopper said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

He walked over to one of the newspaper drawers, grabbed it with both hands and shook it violently.

“Hopper ...” Eleven called again, her hands covering her ears as if she was trying to control herself, shaking her head sideways.

“Just give me a second to think this through!” he spun around roughly. “PLEASE! Is that too much to ask?”

Suddenly Eleven started screaming, sending all the papers, boxes and folders flying across the room, and everyone covered their ears at the sound of her screeching cry. The archives room door flung open and Eleven stormed outside the room, crying hard.

“El, stop! STOP! Shit!” Hopper called, running after her.

“El, come back!” Mike screamed.

“They’re coming!” Lucas shouted

Hopper, Joyce, and the kids quickly ran out of the room after her. As luck would have it, the Cerberus appeared at the end of the hall at the exact same moment. Hopper saw it first and he held his arm out to keep everyone from moving forward.

“Stop!” he shouted, his breath catching in his throat. “Step back, everybody step back!”

They hurried back in and Hopper slammed the door, bracing his weight against it. Then he saw Wan Li, who hadn’t moved.

“We have to go back!” Mike screamed.

“Can you do something?” Hopper asked Wan Li.

“I ...” Wan Li was frozen like a statue.

“CAN YOU DO SOMETHING?” Hopper urged him again.

The young man closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Joyce prayed that whatever he was doing, he'd be able to do, and was going out — from within — to help Eleven.

“We can't leave her out there alone!” Mike said again as he threw himself into Hopper's chest.

“Knock it off!”

“Let me go!” Mike pummeled unmercifully at Hopper's chest.

Hopper caught the boy's fists. “AND THEN WHAT? Huh? What'd you wanna do, kid? Fight this Cerberus?”

“Yeah! If I have to, I will!”

“Chill out! I want to get to her as much as you do, but if anyone is safe here, it's El. If *you* go out there, you'll only last one minute.”

“Hey! Wan L—” Hopper called again, keeping his weight against the door.

“Hop, shh,” Joyce called, waving him off, her eyes on the boy. “I think he's gone after El.”

“Hey, Hopper, got a lighter?” came Steve's voice.

“Aren't you a bit too young to smoke?” Dustin asked.

“I didn't ask for a cigarette, dumbass; just the lighter. C'mon, Hop, send it over. And, Lucas, need your slingshot.”

“What are you planning to do?” Hopper asked as he tossed him his lighter.

“See all this paperwork? Would be a waste to leave it.”

“But if you do that, we destroy whatever other proof might be here!” Mike argued.

“Yeah? Have another plan for that gross beast in the hall?” Steve

stared at everyone and no one budged. "Okay", he exclaimed, "I say we know what to do now."

He walked over to the table and kicked the feet out of it while the rest of the party gathered sheets of paper.

"Go!" Joyce said. "I'll stay with them."

Hopper looked at her for an instant. "Take this," he said, handing her his gun.

"No," she argued, "you'll need it, keep it!"

"You'll need it more than me." He looked gravely at the kids and then back at her. "Good luck," he said as she accepted it.

"Go!" She urged him.

"I'm coming with you!" Mike said.

Hopper stopped him with his hand across the boy's chest. "No. You stay here and help. I'll bring her back."

"Then, at least take this," Mike said as he pinned a walkie against Hopper's chest. Hopper nodded appreciatively and left.

Notes for the Chapter:

Last minute change. Closure will come in two more chapters, "soon" as Hopper would put it. Thanks again for reading.

9. The Bitter Bit

Joyce drew a deep breath, terrified of running into this monster outside the door but determined not to let her fears appear on her face, then crept to the door. She'd done this before. She could do it again. When she heard nothing in the hallway, she eased out of the safety of the room. The kids followed, Steve and Lucas first in line.

"Where'd it go?" Steve wondered.

"I don't know," Joyce said, casting glances in all directions, her body on high alert.

"What's going on?" Mike said. "Do you think it's gone cause of Wan Li?"

"Like he's pushed it away?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know," Mike replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"But no, he can't," Joyce whispered, "he's got to help El."

In circle, with their back to each other's and Hopper's gun held out in Joyce's steady hands, their eyes raked their surroundings for movement. They could only hear squelching noises, but the hall was empty; the monster was nowhere to be seen.

"Mom!" she heard Jonathan call. "Mom!"

"Over here!" she shouted.

Suddenly, when Joyce was expecting to see Jonathan come out of the junction of two corridors, the monster appeared.

Without looking at each other, keeping their gazes on the monster, Lucas handed Steve an arrow made of a table leg and lit its end, and then Steve set it in the rubber of the slingshot. He waited.

"Aim for the heads," Mike whispered as Will and Dustin lit the next arrows.

At about six and a half feet tall, it moved slowly, heavily, chittering as it turned and looked in their direction. Its three wide mouths drooled. Its heads lifted up and Joyce felt the tremors shaking through her when the beast groaned. In two shakes, the monster dashed into the open hallway.

“RUN!” Joyce screamed.

Lucas grabbed Max’s hand, and they and Will didn’t wait to be asked a second time.

“Mrs. Byers, first head on the left, on three,” Steve said, and counted.

Steve and Joyce hit the beast straight in the first eye, and Steve had reloaded his weapon before the Cerberus screeched and lifted its two other heads again.

“Mom!” Jonathan shouted again.

He stumbled at the end of the hallway, past the monster, and his feet slid across the floor as he spotted them, pulling himself to an abrupt stop. Nancy, right behind him, ran into his back and they both jerked as if they’d received an electric shock when they saw what was standing between them and their family and friends.

For a second, everything stopped. Joyce saw the creature turning its heads back in Jonathan’s and Nancy’s direction and froze; she could see the look of horror and disbelief on the tweens’ faces.

“Nancy!” Mike shouted.

“Jonathan, go away!” Joyce yelled as Nancy took the rifle from Jonathan’s hands and aimed it toward the beast.

“I can get it, Mrs. Byers,” Nancy shouted, resolute and calm, as one of her eyes closed and the other focused behind the rifle raised to a firing position.

“We’re in each other’s way!” Steve called out. “Get out of the way, you gonna get us all killed, Nance!”

Mike and Dustin ducked and jumped into the archives room and barely missed hitting Wan Li who was coming out, looking like a zombie.

“Wan Li,” Mike shouted.

Joyce turned around to face the young man whose composure looked very much like Eleven’s when she was furrowing her brow and summoning the strength of her mind. Joyce stepped aside to let the boy walk past them. Then, she whirled around to the monster again as screeching wails blasted, nearly deafened her.

The Cerberus was pushed backward despite its best efforts to dig its claws into the floor, pinned to the wall by an invisible force, mournfully squalling discontinuously. Jonathan and Nancy sprinted to get over to the group’s side. All of a sudden, the Cerberus managed to run free and Wan Li fell, drained, onto the floor.

Joyce hurried to his side and put her hand behind his head.

“Eleven,” he murmured weakly.

“What happened? I thought you were with her,” she panicked. “Is she on her own?”

Mike emerged next to her. “Where is she?” Mike pressed him.

“I’m sorry ...” he breathed.

“WHERE ARE THEY?”

“The ... the roof,” he exhaled, and then he lost consciousness.

Mike jumped to his feet.

Joyce grabbed him by his coat.

“No!” she ordered.

“What?” he asked in disbelief.

“That thing isn’t dead! You’re not going anywhere.” She couldn’t

worry about so many lives at once anymore. “Jonathan, Steve, Nancy, take everyone out.” Jonathan stared at her resolutely and nodded. “I’m counting on you. Don’t forget Wan Li.”

“No!” Mike wailed as Nancy grabbed him by the collar and Joyce ran off. “Elevennnn!” Mike screamed again at her back.

Joyce raced up the building stairwell, her heart drumming in every single part of her body and, out of breath, and she pushed the rooftop door open with both hands just as she heard Eleven’s muffled scream. A brisk wind swirled about her face, whipping her hair in front of her eyes, and she quickly brushed it away with the flat of her hand. The bright midday glare of the sun blinded her and she squinted her eyes and shielded them behind one hand, scanning her surroundings for Eleven and Hopper. She spotted them out back, opposite the entrance side of the building. Eleven was crying, and Hopper was walking slowly to her, his hands out.

“El! Please ...”

“Go away!” she screamed, her hands on her ears as she bent forward, backing toward the bank of the cliff. “Go find your real daughter.”

Joyce had Hopper’s back to her, she couldn’t see his face, but Eleven’s harsh words hurt him so much that he reared back as if he’d suddenly been punched in the face.

“What ...?” he breathed. “You *are* my real daughter.”

“No, I’m not; you already have a family. Why would you want me?”

Eleven’s wracking wails were coming out in such desolate way they were a torture to Joyce — and everyone who heard them. The girl cried with more violence than the direst gale, as if every inch of her being screamed in unison.

“Kid, sweetie, I promise you — I *promise* you.” he stressed, “whether Sara is alive or not, it doesn’t change the fact that I want to be your father more than anything in the world. It doesn’t change *one*

thing.”

“Brenner is here!” Dustin’s voice snapped through Hopper’s walkie. “Code red!”

“You’re lying! Lying, lying, lying! You’re just saying that so I come back. And then you’re going to give me back to Papa.”

“God, El, I would *never* do that and you know it. You’ve been through a lot and you’re —”

“You used me, just like him!” she said, running away.

Joyce didn’t get it. She’d seen them together. They were perfect. Okay, he had mentioned a tantrum or two, but which parent didn’t experience one with their tween? They were caring, and respectful, and loving. What had gotten into Eleven? she wondered.

“Hey now, don’t be unfair, I was never like that son of a bitch; I never *took* you from anyone, okay? We found each other, we *chose* each other, remember?” he replied as he rapidly walked after her.

Thankfully, Joyce had been silent since she’d arrived, Eleven threw herself into her arms, unaware of her presence. From the corner of her eye, she saw Hopper drop his shoulders and exhale a sigh of relief.

“El, sweetheart, what’s going on?” Joyce pulled out the kindest voice she could muster.

“No!” Eleven said again, trying to get away.

“Hey now, just listen to this, okay? You don’t have to talk, just listen.” She stroked her hands from her shoulders to her face, and then she pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “You know what I told Hop last night? I told him he was the best thing that could have happened to you. And you know what he replied? He said *you* were the best thing that happened to him.”

Eleven said nothing, but her features eased slightly.

“Honey, we’re here for you. We’re more than friends: we’re

family. Hopper loves you very much and I know you love him, too, and you're scaring us both right now."

Hopper kneeled next to them and said nothing. He put his hand on the girl's shoulder. The aggressiveness, the fear, the look of the hunted animal that had been in her eyes vanished and she seemed less tense.

"Honey," Hopper said, "Brenner is almost here. If we're going to do this, I need to know if you're on board cause I can do *nothing* without you. If you're not up to it, then let's just run away and we'll figure something else out."

"I just want this to be over," she cried and threw herself into Hopper's arms.

"Oh, kid, I'm so sorry. I want this to be over too," he replied as he closed his eyes and breathed in her hair. And then he looked up at Joyce and mouthed "Thank you."

God, no, Joyce had no doubt that they loved each other like a "real" father and daughter.

"We gotta go," Joyce urged. "Or you've got to focus on what we said: planting new beliefs in Brenner's head and shaping them."

Hopper pulled back and caught her face. "Do you think you can you do it?"

She stared back into his eyes. Wiped her tears. "Yes." He nodded too, knowingly, and tried to smile.

Hopper stood up and helped Eleven to her feet. He looked at Joyce, his gaze strong but shadowed by unmeasurable anguish. She gave him his gun back.

A rooftop door opened again, not the same Joyce had arrived from, and a tall man with white hair emerged. Eleven swallowed, her fists clenched by her sides.

Hopper took Eleven's left hand in his own and shielded her with his body as his right hand rose, his gun aiming toward Dr. Brenner who

slowly walked toward them.

“Chief Hopper,” Brenner smiled when he finally saw them. “Chief Jim Hopper, what a pleasant surprise. If I’d known you’d be here, I would’ve come with your former colleagues. I’m sure it would have been a privilege for them to handcuff you.”

Hopper and Joyce remained silent, trying their best to conceal their anger, allowing Eleven as much concentration as she needed. But Joyce knew that the smallest thing could trigger Hopper into a revengeful father — and ex-husband, maybe. Joyce felt sick to her stomach and had to force her eyes to stay open.

“Hello, Eleven,” the man said, his voice disgustingly cheerful as he walked on toward them.

“Stay away,” Hopper warned him softly.

Brenner stopped walking, put his feet neatly next to each other, and cocked his head to the side to watch Eleven past Hopper’s square frame. Joyce stepped closer to Hopper to block Brenner’s view completely.

“Wan Li, I can’t,” Eleven whispered from behind Hopper and Joyce, her eyes closed tight, her brows creasing fiercely.

Hopper and Joyce quickly glanced back at her. The hand that she usually outstretched was balled into a fist and pressed against her heart. She was mumbling something they didn’t understand.

The doc held out his hand. “Come on, Eleven, you know you trust me.” He took another step closer.

“STAY BACK!” Hopper shouted, pulling the girl gently behind his back. “Step the hell back you sick bastard!”

“You and I are meant for a great destiny. We had so much work to accomplish ...”

“Don’t push me, Brenner, I’m this close to putting a bullet in your head.”

“Wan —” Eleven cried.

Joyce and Hopper quickly glanced back at her again; Eleven didn’t seem to be doing well. At all. Her whole body was contorted painfully. But as if things weren’t bad enough, when they turned around to face Brenner again, the Cerberus was there, shrieking not fifty feet from them. Joyce gasped. Hopper aimed at it.

“You can make it disappear,” Brenner said. He didn’t seem to be afraid. “You can make it disappear exactly the same way you made it materialize out of thin air.”

Hopper and Joyce said nothing. Joyce looked around for a way out. Couldn’t find one. Looked back at Brenner. Resisted the urge to take the gun out of Hopper’s hand and kill the son of a bitch herself. She looked at Hopper’s other hand, clenched more than ever around Eleven’s small one.

“We can heal that wound,” Brenner said.

“Shut up,” Hopper said.

“We can heal that wound together,” he repeated softly.

“Wan —” Eleven pleaded quietly, “I can’t —”

Hopper’s and Joyce’s eyes traveled frantically from Brenner to Eleven to the monster.

It bent forward in a preying stance, groaning, and then for the first time, Brenner’s assurance shifted.

“Eleven, no,” he said, reaching out a hand.

For the very first time, there was fear in Brenner’s eyes. In a split second, Joyce believed Eleven was directing the monster toward him, but when she dragged her eyes to it, it only had eyes for Eleven. The snakes coiling from its snouts whirled. Grew bigger. The snakes’ mouths opened wide, fangs sticking up and down, red forked tongues flicking in the air.

“I’m sorry,” Eleven whispered in tears.

Before she could comprehend what was happening, Joyce was thrown to the ground. She heard several gunshots and saw Brenner fall to his knees, holding his head. It took her a moment to realize the creature had leaped onto Eleven and Hopper had lost his grip on her. All of a sudden, everything went black and the only sound in her ears was that of Hopper's desperate wail piercing the air like a shockwave.

10. Eleven Past Two

Joyce had stolen Powell's car when he was away, and she'd fled the scene even before she could find the kids. Driving his car well beyond the speed limit, she suddenly tried to figure out where she was and if she'd taken the right turn. Her shaky hands that kept slipping off the steering wheel was only one sign, an external clue of the overwhelming emotions that ravaged her body and crushed her soul. Her whole body was trembling, and it had little to do with the potholes on the road.

As in scenes from a bad dream, the images of the recent events kept replaying in her head, uninvited. Brenner's confession, devoid of emotion, of murdering Dr. Owens, and then holding out his wrists for Powell to cuff him without resistance. Eleven had made it; she'd created new memories in his head, but at what cost? And, god, the worst part: Joyce's own failed attempts at restraining Hopper, how she'd desperately gripped at his waist, arms, and whatever she could grab as he wailed her name restlessly. Just to keep him away. Prevent him from seeing her. The image of Hop carefully gathering Eleven's lifeless body in his arms, pulling her from the pool of blood where she'd fallen on the ground would haunt her nights forever. How he'd turned away, broken beyond repair, waving her off, cutting her off as she tried to comfort him; she'd wanted to be there for him, but he'd ducked out of her reach, carefully carrying the small girl's frame up to Jonathan's car and driving away.

But she was far from ready to quit trying, she said to herself as she spotted the road that disappeared into the woods. She harshly turned the wheel and veered left. She felt bad for them, worried sick that they'd heard the terrible news, but she feared Hopper's state of mind had pushed him off the cliff as well.

Joyce parked her car next to Jonathan's and sprinted to Hopper's cabin. His shack appeared between the trees almost like a painting before the brilliant sunlight. The sky was a perfect blue, but that was the only thing that remained familiar. Nothing would ever be the same again; Hopper had not only lost a daughter today, he'd also lost his first child a second time, and it killed Joyce just to think about it.

“Hop, open up!” she called as she banged her fist on his door. “Hop, open the door!”

She heard the latches being unlocked and Hopper appeared in the threshold. With a cigarette in his mouth, he put his hand on the door frame and leaned against it, blocking the entrance. His shirt was covered with Eleven’s blood. It was unbuttoned and partly untucked as if he’d tried to take it off and failed. Joyce averted her eyes from the red stains, and, focusing on his eyes instead, found more redness in his eyes.

He suddenly dug into his pants pockets and retrieved keys that Joyce instantly recognized as Jonathan’s. “Here,” he said, taking her hand and shoving the keys into it. “Tell him not to leave them in the ignition next time. Now, please go home, Joyce. I need some time alone.”

“Hop, you know I can’t. Can’t let you be alone right now. Did you see how you left?”

“Well, there wasn’t much to do anymore. El is dead. Final.”

“Hop ...” she said, stepping forward to hug him.

He waved his arms in the air to ward her off, refusing her to let her come any closer. “PLEASE,” he exploded, closing his eyes as if to control emotions that couldn’t be controlled, “I can’t ... do this right now.”

When her hand touched his face, he kept his gaze turned away, and she took his hand instead. “Hop, you’re in shock. We need to talk. I want you to talk to me.”

“ABOUT WHAT?”

“Hopper ...”

“You want to know how I feel? Huh? That’s what you wanna know? Okay, I’ll tell you how I feel. I feel nothing. I feel destroyed, empty, cursed, crushed. I hate myself for being alive. I failed to protect her. I feel dead. That enough for you?” His voice broke several times.

“Hop, —”

“WHAT?” he shouted in exasperation, cutting her off once more.

“Don’t do anything stupid, please.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he chuckled bitterly. “Like what? You’re afraid I’ll put a bullet in my head? Well, to be honest, Joyce, I can’t say that’s something I didn’t consider.”

“Let me in,” she said softly. “I’m not going away, I’ll sleep on your porch if I have to.”

“Suit yourself. You’ll freeze to death.”

“No, I won’t. It’s spring now. And I know you won’t let me sleep out here. You know why?”

“Why?” he asked as if he had no choice but had no interest in the answer.

“Because you’re a good man.”

He sighed, dropped his head, lifted it back up, and locked eyes with hers again. “A good man, huh? What good is that for me?” They stared at each other another minute that felt like an eternity to Joyce, and he finally gave in: “Want a scotch?” he said. He flicked his cigarette out in the yard, and turned around inside. “I want a scotch.”

She exhaled and followed him, closing the door behind her and taking her coat off. She hadn’t been very far behind, he mustn’t have had more than ten minutes on his own but his furniture was already upside down: clothes, books, and paperwork scattered all across the floor as if he’d been robbed, as if a tornado had hit the place. Both were the case, she realized. The blinds were pulled, it was as dark inside the house as the dreadful shadow covering their hearts, and Joyce could physically feel the cold pain coming from everywhere around; every short breath she took was hollow in her chest, like blades in her throat.

She met him in the kitchen. He put a glass in her hand and clicked it with his own, and then he swallowed his beverage in one gulp.

Bracing against the countertop, he helped himself to another one and drank it, too.

“So?” he said, staring at her. “What’d you wanna talk about?”

“I can’t even begin to imagine how you feel right now ...”

“No, you’re right; you can’t.”

“I’m so, so sorry. I know you believe life holds nothing more for you, and it will be hard to see otherwise, but give yourself some time. You have people around you who care for you. *I* care for you. A lot.”

He shook his head, knocked senseless by pain and alcohol. Her eyes stinging with tears, she stared at him; this wasn’t going to be easy. He grabbed the bottle again and raised it above his glass. He had every right to want to lose himself to drunkenness right now, she knew it of course, but she walked over to him, wanting to be close to him and simply slow him down a little. She called his name softly as she put her hands on his own.

His sunken, haunted eyes looked up at her. Even the startling warmth of the luminous blue color that once flared in his eyes with kindness and intelligence had been snatched away, stained and replaced by rocketing grey. She gave him a weak, sad smile. They stared deep into each other’s eyes. Hers burnt with tears, but she willed them away, and kept them locked to his, hoping to keep this line of communication open.

Ultimately, he put the bottle and his glass down and clasped his hands on either side of her face instead, searching her eyes only for the flash of a second before he crushed his lips roughly against hers, pushing her against the partition wall, cornering her there as he pressed himself against her. He tasted of hard whiskey and intolerable levels of hardship. The kiss was painful, and not just physically, but she not only allowed him, she threw herself into it, her heart beating fiercely. Her arms reached up and twined themselves around his strong neck while his hands, firm and unwavering, worked their way over her body. He held her with one powerful arm around her waist, pulled her to him as close as he could, his breath short and shaky. Tears coursed down her face,

unchecked, but she kissed him back wholeheartedly, comforting each other but especially him in ways that no words ever would, with the same fiery and demanding intensity, a small whimper of sheer need shuddering from her throat and her heart yanking in and out of her chest. Then, as suddenly as he'd initiated it, Hopper fiercely pulled back to end the kiss, raising shaking hands in the air, waving, and he scratched his scalp.

"I'm sorry," he panted, and staggered backward.

"No, Hop. You must feel you have plenty of reasons to be sorry. But I don't want to be one of them." Her voice wavered, exhausted from her pain and his, from the emotion, and the tension between them.

He wrapped his arms around his chest, hunched forward, and waved her off. He doubled over, his hands on his knees as if he couldn't breathe. She followed him, kneeled in front of him. She caught his face between her hands, forcing him to meet her gaze, defying him to break contact, and as she caressed his broken face, she murmured soothing words to him.

"Breathe ..." she whispered. "Let it out ... It's okay to cry ..."

She heard the creaking noise of the door opening behind her, and Hopper's face went white in an instant as he glanced at it. She rapidly turned to it, and her heart skipped a beat. Eleven stood in the doorway, her eyes bloodshot. Now straightened up, Hopper held his breath and froze, and Joyce grabbed his arm.

"Oh my god," she panted and her hand went to cover her mouth.

His voice cracked. "Do you see her, too?"

"Yes ..." Joyce breathed, unable to move either.

"What ar—? You were dead," he moaned. He tried to find the strength to put one word before the other, but his voice only faltered into unintelligible croaks. "I thought you were ... gone —"

His breath short, Hopper reeled in shock onto his knees. Joyce kept her hand in his hair, forcing the large and resistant lump down her

throat, sobs punching through her frantic pants like the man next to her.

“No, I’m not gone,” Eleven murmured, shaking her head slightly.

Eleven rushed in a single movement to his side, kneeled, and wound her arms around his neck, and he wrapped his own around her back, his whole body trembling so much it made Joyce shake. Their faces stuck together, Eleven clutched handfuls of his shirt, her fists balled tightly over his shoulders, and Hopper tangled his fingers in the soft and rebellious curls of her hair at the back of her head. When Joyce started to move away to give them privacy, Hopper grabbed her hand. Their eyes met, he shook his head, and then he pulled her down into their embrace, Eleven entwined between the two adults. They sobbed in each other’s arms, taking in the new reality and releasing the tension of this past hour, more relief than their hearts could hold.

It lasted a long moment, but every one of them was too shaken up to let go.

“I got so scared,” she cried, “I’m so sorry, Dad.”

Hopper gasped. He pulled his head back just enough to look at her, and Joyce scooted her buttocks to sit further away against the wall.

“No, no ...” he murmured, his voice shaky as he gently took her face in his hands. “Don’t be sorry. *I’m* sorry I made you feel ...” He stroked her face and gently wiped her tears. “What did you just call me?”

She cracked a small smile. “Dad? Is that ... okay?”

He chuckled between tears. “Yes, kid,” he cried, “that’s *okay*.” He rested his chin over her head, and pulled back again, staring into her eyes. “Don’t ever, *ever* doubt again that you’re my real daughter, El, because I love you more than I can say, okay?”

“Love?”

He laughed. “Oh, jeez. Seriously, we’ve never encountered this one?” Joyce raised her eyebrows at him, a soft chuckle coming out of

her throat and grinning from ear to ear as tears kept rolling down silently. “Love, that’s, um ... Love, okay, it’s when you feel something in here,” — he pointed to his chest — “it’s a power that is so strong that it guides you, gives you strength, it makes you a better person. Someone you love is someone you can’t live without. It’s a gift. How about that’s our next word for the day? Let’s make it a month.”

“Love,” she repeated, a smile painting across her face.

“We’ll teach each other,” he said, and she nodded her head. Getting to his feet, he held out his hand to help her up. “What ... I don’t understand ... What happened over there?”

Joyce stood, too, and they all sat around the kitchen table, Eleven’s hand still in Hopper’s.

“The girl who was presumably kidnapped is dead,” she replied, her eyes sharp again. “I needed Pap—” she trailed off and corrected herself. “I needed Brenner to believe it. I’m sorry you were in the way. It required too much energy to try and isolate you from it.”

She looked down and pointed her fingers to his chest. Hopper glanced down to what she indicated: the blood stains his shirt from earlier were gone.

“Nothing happened,” she said as both adults wore masks of stunned disbelief. “Your eyes tricked you.”

“That means ... If I go and check the rear of Jonathan’s car, I won’t find, um ... anything?” he asked.

“Actually,” she said, “there’s some kind of a big doll there. It’s wearing your clothes, Joyce.”

Joyce laughed. “That’s fine, sweetie.” She turned to Hopper who was frowning, and she patted his hand friendly. She mouthed “sex” and said the rest out loud: “doll. Long story,” she said as she pursed her lips.

“Wan Li can help you, um, you know, forget this whole thing ever happened if you want to,” Eleven said.

“No,” he decided. “You broke the curse, kid.”

“That’s a good thing?”

“A very good thing.”

The radio beeped, startling them. Eleven raised her head and listened to the succession of dots and dashes. Then she leapt from her chair, whispering a thrilled “Mike”. Hopper gasped and dropped his head in defeat.

Joyce brushed her hand over his neck and he lifted his face to her.

“You’re not done worrying, Hop,” she said with a knowing smile. “Welcome back to the tween universe.”

He nodded. “That’s fine.” He bent over to her, leaning on his elbows, and stared intently at her, just inches away from her face. “Can we start over? I wasn’t ready,” he whispered.

Joyce cocked her head to the side and smiled heartedly. “I’d like that a lot.”

They closed their eyes, ready to engage in a kiss when Eleven’s voice came from behind. “Joyce, Will and the boys want to know if the birthday party still stands! Dad, can we go?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Feedback is good both for the soul and ego. And a starving soul is bad, very bad, not to mention a starving soul on Eggos. Okay, it sucks. I’m outta here. But either way, I loved writing this story, and if you enjoyed (or not) reading it, if you immersed into it like I did, a few words, that’s my reward. I’ll shush now ...